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Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

Reconciling

Editorial

Irma Fast Dueck

This year some faculty from Canadian Mennonite University and from St. Paul's College in Winnipeg have been meeting to study "Called to be Peacemakers," a document prepared for Catholic-Mennonite dialogues. Our discussions have frequently turned to themes of church unity, and CMU participants have tried to explain to our Catholic sisters and brothers why there are so many varieties of Mennonites (at least ten in Manitoba alone). During one discussion, a CMU professor exclaimed, "Mennonites seem to think that unity is dependent upon intellectual agreement. If this is really true, we will never have unity, for we will never all agree. Our unity must be based on something more than intellectual assent!"

As I listened to my colleague's outburst, I remembered the words of a Catholic bishop who reminded church leaders attending an ecumenical gathering in Winnipeg that God has already given us the gift of unity in Jesus Christ, and we're invited to live into that unity. This issue of *Vision* focuses on reconciling, and the articles included help us understand both the unity that has been given to us and what it means to live into it.

This issue of *Vision* is focused on the theme of reconciling, and in various ways the articles contained here help us understand both the unity that has been given to us and what it means to live into it.

The issue begins with a communion sermon by Rudy Baergen, on Jesus' prayer for his followers in John 17, which testifies to the origin of our unity in the action of God. Betty Pries, a long-time mediator, reminds us that in Christ we're shackled together. She draws on biblical texts to develop theological principles for understanding and responding to the conflict that is inevitable in church life.

Marva Dawn and Allan Rudy-Froese reflect on the theme of reconciliation through a consideration of two practices of the

church: worship and preaching. Just as our reconciliation originates in God, our worship also begins with God. Dawn explains how the rites of confession and absolution bear witness to God's merciful work of reconciliation in Christ. Rudy-Froese offers a spiritual exercise designed to help preachers and others experience and participate more fully in the reconciling work of God.

Matthew 18:15-20 has shaped historical Anabaptist-Mennonite practices of church discipline and forgiveness. Tim Kuepfer carefully revisits this text, reminding us that in its Gospel setting the central concern is for "the least of these," and the goal is to bring restoration and wholeness. Joseph Liechty, who has spent many years working at reconciliation in Ireland, analyzes the meaning and practice of forgiveness, especially developing the relationship of forgiveness to reconciliation.

Nan Cressman and Kerry Strayer work with issues of conflict and decision making in the church. Out of her extensive experience in church conflict transformation, Cressman tells stories about—and proposes principles for—constructively engaging congregational conflict. Strayer examines decision-making models, highlighting the value of consensus-oriented approaches in fostering healthy relationships in congregations.

Finally, Susan Kennel Harrison and Jeremy Bergen reflect on the church's witness of reconciliation to the wider world. Harrison, who has been involved with Muslim-Christian dialogue and relationships, examines what it means for Christians to live in reconciling ways with people of other faiths. Bergen compares ecclesial and governmental apologies and explores how the church's apologies embody an understanding of the church's nature and its ministry of reconciliation.

This issue is seasoned with the wisdom of authors who have studied and worked at reconciliation in places of deep animosity, brokenness, and alienation. Their writing nevertheless reflects a profound but perhaps understandable hope. After all, the church in reconciling proclaims its faith, a faith rooted in Jesus Christ and the generous love and mercy of God.

About the editor

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United in Christ
A sermon on John 17

Rudy Baergen

Jesus prayed, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:20-21). This picture of unity contrasts starkly with the history of the Christian church, now carved up into thousands of denominations and subgroups. After 2000 years, Jesus' prayer for his followers to be one as he is one with the Father may seem like a distant dream.

I suspect that many of us have had experiences that have brought home to us the extent of the church's disunity. When Helen and I were studying Spanish in a missionary language school in San Jose, Costa Rica, we were hard put to sense what we had in common with many of the American students, who backed the CIA-supported dirty wars in Guatemala and El Salvador and supported U.S. Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North in his illegal clandestine efforts to fund the Contras' subversive war in Nicaragua. We found ourselves up against a whole mind-set of political, social, and theological values that we found deeply objectionable. Even our understandings of God's salvation seemed to go in different directions. What does Christian unity mean when we disagree on politics, ethics, worship style, how to read the Bible, and even basic confessions of faith?

What does Christian unity mean when we disagree on politics, ethics, worship style, how to read the Bible, and even basic confessions of faith?

The history of schism in our own Anabaptist-Mennonite story is a source of embarrassment to us. But we aren't alone. My Baptist friends in Bolivia used to say that where two Baptist brothers are gathered, there are three Baptist churches. Perhaps it is some consolation to know that the early church also struggled

with divisions. In spite of the initial show of unity in the book of Acts, we soon hear about the conflict between Jewish and Greek Christians in Jerusalem, which leads to the selection of deacons in Acts 6. Acts 15 tells of a conference held to prevent the first major schism in the church over the issue of what to require of Gentile Christians. The apostle Paul's letters also give insight into divisions and disagreements that plagued the churches throughout the Mediterranean world of the first century.

If we pay close attention to the writings that come out of John's community—the Gospel of John and the letters of John—we also detect serious struggles. John's Gospel needs to be read at several different levels. John says there are disciples who turned back and no longer follow Jesus, those who believed but now no longer believe (6:66). At the time of the writing of the Gospel and the letters at the turn of the first century, that division was still playing itself out. John writes, "They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us" (1 John 2:19). In the third letter, John speaks of a Diotrephes who does not acknowledge John's authority and in fact expels John's friends from the church (vv. 9-10). So Jesus' prayer for unity addresses an immediate concern within John's community and in John's Gospel. Disunity has plagued the followers of Jesus from the beginning.

Jesus prays that those who come to believe may be one as he and the Father are one. Note that the Father and the Son remain distinct despite their unity. Unity does not necessarily mean sameness.

The prayer of Jesus, sometimes called his high priestly prayer, is found only in John's Gospel, as part of Jesus' lengthy discourse at the Passover supper, which begins in chapter 13. Jesus prays not just for his immediate community of disciples but also for future believers, for us: "for those who will believe in me" through the disciples' word. We are part of that long chain through which faith has been passed on; it winds its way back through the centuries, through a multitude of languages and cultures, back to the disciples.

Jesus prays that those who come to believe through the word of the disciples may be one as he and the Father are one. Note that this oneness allows for some diversity, in that the Father and

the Son remain distinct despite their unity.[1] Although there is singleness in purpose and mission, there is also distinction. Unity does not necessarily mean sameness. Then what is the nature of this unity that Jesus calls for? Is it denominational or organizational unity? Is it having a single purpose? Does it mean working together without conflict? Is it some kind of mystical union that isn't necessarily evident in personal feelings, harmonious relationships or organization? Is it something we create?

When Jesus prays that his followers may be one as he and the Father are one, our attention is drawn to an essential point: this unity is not the result of human endeavour but has its origin in God's action. Jesus prays to the Father for this unity. The key to unity is the power of God. Unity comes from the Father and the Son to the believers. Our action and our feelings are not the source of our unity in the church.

At the 2006 Mennonite Church Canada Assembly in Edmonton, Alberta, the Faith and Life Committee statement, "The Unity of Christians in the Body of Christ," referred to Ephesians 2:

> *According to the apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, unity is not our doing. We are bound together by something bigger than our own efforts and immeasurably greater than our failures. Unity in Christ is not something we choose to create; rather, it is the blessing of Christ's death on the cross granted to us. In Ephesians 2, Paul is talking specifically of how Christ broke down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. In Paul's mind there could be no division more radical, yet God through Christ broke down the barrier and placed the two enemies into one family.*[2]

We can pick our friends, but we do not choose our siblings. Likewise, as God's adopted children, we don't choose our brothers and sisters in faith. The question is not whether the family has been formed into one body by one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all, but whether the unity bestowed will be claimed and celebrated (Ephesians 4).

Our congregation is one not as a result of our own efforts. If our unity depended on us, we would have failed long ago. Con-

flict has left its mark on our church over the decades. Angry things have been said, which have left their imprint of pain, personal and corporate. We are not always of one mind theologically, even though we have a common confession of faith. We have disagreements about how to read the Bible on matters such as homosexuality, abortion, use of material possessions, and other ethical issues facing our society. We may even disagree about how to understand the authority of scripture. The unity we experience is not a consequence of our tolerance and inclusiveness. It is a miracle of grace. We are bound together in peace by Christ through his death on the cross (Eph. 2:15-16).

This morning we celebrate our union in Christ with communion. The Lord's Supper has a vertical and a horizontal dimension. In the supper we celebrate the union that Christ has given to us. That is the vertical dimension. Communion does not create unity among us; it recognizes that God through Christ has already made us one. All our grounds for enmity have been eliminated, even if we don't acknowledge that fact. The horizontal dimension of communion has to do first of all with our acknowledging to one another that we are one before Christ, even when we disagree and are in conflict. Furthermore, the horizontal dimension involves an inner and outer declaration that we will hang in there with one another, no matter how difficult the journey, because Jesus has asked us to do that. Jesus wants us to be one even as he and the Father are one.

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Some years ago I helped mediate a serious conflict within my congregation. When it came time to celebrate communion, one of the parties, recognizing that there was still much to resolve in the broken relationship, wondered whether it was right to participate in the communion service. My response was this: When we celebrate communion, we are not declaring that we have no differences, disagreements, or struggles. We are declaring that God through Christ's death has made us one, that Jesus wants us to be one even as he and the Father are one. True, this oneness is not just a mystical relationship that gives us licence to ignore our

disunity in practice. Communion is also our declaration that we want to be united, that we commit ourselves to do what is necessary, step by step, slow as that process might be, to realize the unity that Christ offers us. The unity of believers is grounded in the unity of the Father and the Son. And while it will only be consummated in heaven, it is agenda to which we commit ourselves now.

In the Mennonite church we have a tradition of serving one another in communion. We pass the elements down the row. The idea is not to serve oneself but to serve the other. In order to be especially conscious of that mutual service today, the server will give the bread and cup to the second person in the row, and that person will serve the one who was passed over. The basket will then be passed on to the third person who will serve the second person in the row, and so on. Don't serve yourself: let someone else serve you, and be eager to serve the person next to you. We also have an old tradition of looking into the eyes of the one with whom we take communion, to acknowledge that we are on this road of experiencing the unity that God has given to us. When you receive the bread and the wine, look at the person serving you, nod your head, and smile or say, "Christ has made us one!"

Jesus wants us to be one, even as he and the Father are one. Why does Jesus want us to be one? "So that the world may believe that the Father has sent me." Disunity among us cuts the feet from under the gospel. Disunity among us gives the lie to what we proclaim, and the world will see our hypocrisy. If we don't commit ourselves to unity, how can we expect the world to believe that Jesus and the Father are one?

Jesus wants us to be one, even as he and the Father are one. Come, let us celebrate our unity in Christ. Come, let us claim the unity that Christ offers to us.

Notes

[1] Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (xii–xxi)*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 29A, 2nd ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 775.
[2] See http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/resourcecentre/Browse/972.

About the author

Rudy Baergen is the senior pastor at Bethel Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba. This sermon was preached as the culmination of a series on spiritual preferences and unity.

Being in communion
Unity amid conflict in the church

Betty Pries

As a child, I was disturbed by the gap between the ideal church we learned about in Sunday school and the real church we experienced in our daily lives. I was about eight years old when I suggested to my parents that perhaps the answer lay in starting a reformed Mennonite church. My parents smiled and replied that if I did that, soon I would need a reformed reformed Mennonite church, and then before long I would need a reformed reformed reformed Mennonite church. And so began my first life lesson on human nature and its impact on human institutions.

That we have conflict in the church is not surprising, nor should it distress us. The Bible, after all, is in large measure a record of conflicts that occurred among people trying to understand how to lead holy lives. That being the case, the Bible must have something profound to say about the reality of conflict in our lives and, by extension, in our church organizations. As I have reflected on the nature of conflict, I have begun to name for myself five principles. I offer them as a starting point for theological reflection.

Conflict is not just inevitable, it is part of God's gift to us. This statement seems ironic, even untrue—especially considering how much conflict can hurt us. How can conflict be part of God's gift?

Let us consider the matter from another perspective. Most of us would readily agree with the following statements:

- Each of us has been created as a unique individual. If our uniqueness is God-given, then it must follow that God celebrates—even intends—our diversity.
- As much as our uniqueness is a gift, it also limits us. We excel in some areas, and we do not excel in others. As a result of our uniqueness, we cannot survive alone; we need one another. In this sense, our interdependence is also God-given. Herein lies the rub: we need those who differ from us.

- In all our human variety, we are created in the image of God. We all—even those with whom we are in conflict—bear the stamp of the Holy One.
- If the above statements are true, then it must follow that conflict is, at least to some degree, inherent in God's design of creation.[1]

In the Bible are plenty of examples of godly people trying to address conflict in the midst of diversity. Consider, for example, the book of Ephesians. Paul recognizes the tension among the various factions in the church. Instead of lamenting it, he reframes his readers' perspectives by reminding them that together these Christians all form the body of Christ. Whether they agree or disagree with one another, they have no choice but to be in relationship with one another. In Christ, they are all shackled together.[2]

Business management theory has long acknowledged that a workplace without conflict is caught in a frozen state. Without disagreement, the creativity of employees goes untapped. Moreover, without disagreement, a company becomes blind to its weaknesses and is much more likely to fall into unhealthy behaviours.

Conflict is God's gift to us because we need each other. We need the dynamism and discernment that comes from speaking with others whose thinking differs from our own.

These dynamics have biblical and theological parallels. In the Bible we observe a tremendous diversity of perspectives. Should women prophesy and lead in ministry, or should women be silent? Are we to give all we have to the poor or remember that the poor are always with us? Are we saved by works or by faith? Should we hold one another accountable for ungodly behaviour or shall we forgive seventy times seven times? One could argue that the Bible is a conversation between various perspectives. There is wisdom in our disagreements. It is in the engagement between perspectives that discernment takes place.

Consider the debate between those who would like the church to be more flexible in nonessential matters, more open, and those who would like the church to be clearer about its boundaries, more pure. One could argue that those who espouse greater openness are holding fast to biblical principles of hospitality. Those

who desire clarity in matters of boundaries, however, are adhering to biblical principles of holiness. Both holiness and hospitality are excellent values. Both are biblical values, and both are right.

Of course, they can also both be wrong. The problem is this: When we concern ourselves only with holiness, we become rigid and inward looking. We make an idol of our purity. When we concern ourselves only with hospitality, however, we lose our sense of who we are. We become so open to others that we lose the language of our own faith. Our attitudes and beliefs become ambiguous and, at worst, we no longer know why we are Christians or what holds us together.

Either holiness or hospitality can become a problem if we pay attention only to one dimension and exclude the other. Instead, we are invited to live in the tension that is created by holding both values—hospitality and holiness—together at the same time. It is no accident that in practice these values are more often held together not in one person but in a community that embodies dialogue between those inclined toward holiness and those who favor hospitality.

Conflict is God's gift to us because we need each other. We need the dynamism and discernment that comes from speaking with others whose thinking differs from our own. We need those whose uniqueness and limitations complement our own uniqueness and limitations. We need those who favour the other end of whatever theological spectrum we are considering; such interaction keeps us humble about the rightness of our own perspectives. In all of these ways, conflict is a gift to us.

"Love your enemies" does not assume a prior reconciliation. As much as we need those who differ from us, conflict can be destructive. When conflict breaks away from the goal of wholeness, its deep divisions tear into our souls, causing tremendous grief. Conflict can do more than hurt our feelings—it can destroy us mentally and physically. Furthermore, the deeper our descent into conflict has been, the bleaker the journey out appears. In this deep cavern of pain, our enemies are fantastically unlovable; and yet, biblically we are commanded to love these enemies—while they are still our adversaries. The Bible assumes that we will follow this command even while our enemies are unlovable (Matt. 5:43-48).

It may seem obvious to Christians familiar with this command that loving one's enemies does not assume a prior reconciliation. But to practice loving enemies is challenging. What does it mean to love our enemies? It entails praying for them, speaking the truth in love, seeking what is for their best. But when we have been deeply hurt? Being faithful to this command is sometimes an act of sheer determination and will: we love our enemies perhaps not yet with our hearts but already with our minds, because we have been commanded to do so. All the while, we pray that God will melt our hearts.[3]

Our energies are best focused on changing ourselves, not others. This change happens in response to God's invitation to us to become whole.

Since I began my work as a mediator, I have been fascinated by the story of Jacob and Esau's reconciliation (Gen. 32:3–33:17). What is particularly interesting to me is that sandwiched in the middle of this story is the account of Jacob wrestling with God. I propose that an authentic meeting between Jacob and Esau was possible only because of this night of wrestling.

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Two things happen during Jacob's night of wrestling that are key to his reconciliation with Esau. First, in his struggle with the angel, Jacob demands a blessing from him. Interesting, isn't it? Jacob is about to meet Esau, the brother from whom he stole a blessing many years ago. Now, only hours before meeting his brother again, he knows he cannot hang on to that stolen blessing any longer. If he is to have a blessing, it must be an honest one.

The second key event is that before giving him the blessing, the angel asks Jacob, "What is your name?" And in the moment of saying his name, Jacob must admit to himself and to the wrestler that he is Jacob, the deceiver. Only on making this acknowledgement—only when Jacob faces the reality of who he is and has become—does the wrestler give Jacob his blessing. And with this blessing comes a miracle: Jacob is changed. The angel gives Jacob a new name, a new identity. Now he will no longer be Jacob, the deceiver, but Israel, the one who strives with God.

Often when we are in conflict, we spend our energies thinking about how the other person should change their thinking, their behaviour. Jacob could have focused his energies on all the ways that Esau should change. Instead Jacob took the more important journey. He focused on all the ways he himself needed to be changed and healed. And because he entered this struggle, an authentic reconciliation between the two brothers became possible.

One could argue that in the case of Jacob and Esau, Jacob is the offender and Esau the victim. Jacob is, after all, the one who stole the birthright. Therefore, it is logical that Jacob should be the one to change. According to Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf, however, one of Jesus' most radical acts was to call also on those who were victimized to repent of their sins. Let us be clear: Victims are not being asked to repent of their victimization. Instead, Jesus is asking all of us, victims included, to repent of the large and small ways we have harboured hatred in our hearts.[4]

There is a cycle to conflict that is particularly evident in the lives of nations and families. Those who have been victims, if they move into positions of power, often mimic the behaviour of their offenders and in so doing become offenders themselves. But when becoming whole is the work of all people—those who have been wounded and those who have wounded others—both changed relationships and changed communities become real possibilities. The cycle of conflict is stopped, and lasting change can take place.

God stands with those who are broken and calls for justice. Over the centuries, the Christian church has placed particular emphasis on the sinner and on the cross as the place of redemption. In this process, the voice of those who have been sinned against has often been neglected. Those who have tried to recover this voice often turn to the prophets. They see God as defender of the poor, the widow, and the orphan. In the New Testament, Jesus takes up the torch of the prophets when he identifies himself as one who has been anointed to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19).

The cross, therefore, must be understood as more than a personal invitation to repentance. If Jesus has been anointed to

bring good news to the poor, and if this anointed one is killed by the same powers that oppress the poor, than surely the cross is a cry against injustice. The cross establishes an affinity between Jesus and the wounded, the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed. But the cross is not the end of the story. There is, after all, a resurrection—Jesus' victory over the powers, for the sake of these same wounded people. Now the cross takes on new meaning. The cross is not only a place where those who are broken and wounded are invited to bring their sorrow; the cross is also a place of hope, a place where the wounded may see the possibility of new life dawning.

The cross, of course, continues to be a place where those who have sinned come face to face with what they have done. The sinner is invited to repent, to be changed, and to act justly. But notice what a fascinating meeting ground the cross has now become. At the foot of the cross, the wounded and the sinner meet, sometimes in the same person. An exchange of power occurs, and together with the resurrection, the cross becomes for both a place of healing and a word of hope.

God's grace and forgiveness is available to all. Throughout the Bible, we see evidence of God's grace and forgiveness, made available to all. We are, of course, invited to participate in this grace and forgiveness, offering to one another what we have been given by God. But what comes first: grace and forgiveness, or holding another accountable for sinful behaviour? In this case, the Bible refuses to answer the question.

What comes first: grace and forgiveness, or holding another accountable for sinful behaviour? In this case, the Bible refuses to answer the question. We are to hold one another accountable, and we are to forgive.

Consider the classic text on church discipline in Matthew 18, for example. Here the exhortation to hold one another accountable stands cheek by jowl with the exhortation to forgive one another seventy times seven times. We are to hold one another accountable, and we are to forgive. These two commandments are not considered opposites. They can coexist; they can occur in the same place and at the same time.

Let us assume for a moment that we have succeeded both in holding others accountable and in forgiving them. Let us assume

further that these people who hurt us have sincerely apologized and taken responsibility for their part in the trouble between us. Let us also assume that we have acknowledged and repented for whatever we ourselves may have contributed to this situation. Now what? Where do we go from here?

Miroslav Volf suggests that to move forward with those who have hurt us, we must engage in a form of "holy forgetting." Yes, we want to remember the lessons we have learned; however, to live in peace with one another, we must allow ourselves and the others to be restored to full personhood. This restoration is only possible when the offence no longer claims center stage in our consciousness. After watching generation after generation of Serbs and Croats go to battle to redress the wrongs done to their ancestors, Volf knows this truth in his bones. Somehow the cycle of vengeance and hurt must end.[5]

Unity amid conflict in the church

With these theological principles in mind, let us consider the question, what does it mean to be in communion with one another—to claim the unity of the church—amid conflict and division? Or to put it another way, what does it mean to be the body of Christ when our differences are tearing us apart?

- In Christ, we are shackled one to the other. Like it or not, we are stuck with one another—even if those with whom we are in conflict leave our church. Let us take seriously the idea that Spirit-filled discernment happens in the spaces where we see things differently from one another.
- God has made each of us unique, so let us speak from our unique perspectives. God has made each of us to be limited, so let us offer our perspectives humbly.
- Let us love one another at all times, even when we disagree.
- Let us each think seriously about how we can behave in a more Christ-like manner in this situation. Let us each apologize for those times when we fail to live up to this vision. Let us forgive and be gracious to one another.

Years ago, Mennonite elders spoke with each member of their congregation before communion was to be celebrated, in order to ensure that all were at peace with God and with one another. If a relationship was broken, those involved would be encouraged to

resolve the matter between them so that an authentic communion could be observed. What would it be like if we took the ritual of communion this seriously today? What would our faith communities be like if before every communion we went from home to home ensuring that we were at peace with one another—even if we still disagreed? In Christ, we are one body. Let us celebrate this union with humility and in a spirit of forgiveness and grace.

Notes

[1] Caroline A. Westerhoff, "Conflict: The Birthing of the New," in *Conflict Management in Congregations*, ed. David B. Lott ([Bethesda, MD]: Alban Institute, 2001), 54–61.

[2] Tom Yoder Neufeld, "Walking in the Chain-Gang of Peace: Eph 4:1-3, 17–5:2" (presentation, Mennonite Church Canada Ministers' Conference, St. Catherines, ON, 9 July 2003).

[3] At the time of this writing, it has been a few weeks since the horrific murder of several Amish schoolgirls in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. Almost immediately, the Amish community sent words of forgiveness to the family of the killer. This gracious act was no doubt difficult. It was also a potent example of a community taking seriously the forgiveness commandment.

[4] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 113–19.

[5] Ibid., 131–40.

About the author

Betty Pries lives in Waterloo, Ontario, with her husband, Paul Fieguth, and their children, Anya, Thomas, and Stefan. She is a mediator with Associates Resourcing the Church (ARC). When she tells people that she works with churches in conflict, she almost invariably gets one of two reactions: "No way—churches have conflict?" or "Wow, that must be challenging." Immediately she knows whether the person with whom she is speaking attends church.

Worship and reconciliation

Marva J. Dawn

In this utilitarian age, many churches fall to the temptation to turn worship into a means to accomplish other ends. Some congregations, for example, design worship to "attract the unbeliever." The Bible makes it clear that worship's sole end is to glorify God: we worship because God deserves it. Period. To be sure, an effect of such God-centered worship will be the formation of a people who become more like the God they worship, and this people will, as a result, be actively engaged in inviting their unbelieving neighbors into a relationship with the God they adore.

As we begin to consider the relationship between worship and reconciliation, we must beware lest we take a utilitarian approach and make reconciliation the aim of worship. How can we avoid this mistake and yet discuss worship and reconciliation? What is the relationship between the two, and how is it manifested?

The invitation of a church's worship is to take the presence of God which we have experienced there back into our daily lives, so that we yearn for genuine reconciliation in the world and engage in practices that contribute to it.

Worship of the triune God

For us to see the connection of worship with reconciliation, we must begin by remembering who the God is whom we worship. As Christians, we recognize that in Christ, God has been revealed as a Trinity. Jesus repeatedly told us that He had been sent by His Father and that He would send His Spirit to us.* Furthermore, Jesus asserted that His desire was for us to participate in the unity of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Our worship, then, is made possible by Jesus, who is our high priest. By His grace and by the power of His Spirit we are brought

* [Pronouns referring to persons of the Trinity have been capitalized at the author's request, "so that we remember that Jesus is both God and man and so that we wouldn't genderize other persons of the Trinity."—Ed.]

into His own intimacy with His Father. In worship, God is both the subject who draws us into the trinitarian fellowship and the object of our praise and adoration. We hear God's Word to us read and exposited; we respond with thanksgiving and the offering of our lives; we bring to God our petitions and intercessions, because we continually learn how much the Trinity cares for all for whom we pray, for universe upon universe.

The more we worship the triune God, however, the more we realize that we have alienated ourselves from this God who invites our participation in the Trinity's purposes for the cosmos. We have sinned. We have turned away from God. We have found ourselves incapable of being the people God would have us be and we ourselves would like to be.

Worship and reconciliation with God

Because they recognize that worshipers come bearing the burden of our sin and alienation from God, many churches (especially those that follow the basic patterns of worship laid down in the first centuries of the universal church's existence) begin their services with a rite of confession and absolution. The goal is not utilitarian—to get forgiveness—as the apostle Paul makes clear: "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (2 Cor. 5:19). The fact that God has already accomplished the work of reconciliation frees us to get rid of all the burdens of alienation that remain in us. Thus, in our worship services, as part of our adoration of God, we both confess our sins, which separate us from God, and declare God's work of reconciliation, which has entirely overcome those very sins.

The fact that God has already accomplished the work of reconciliation frees us to get rid of all the burdens of alienation that remain in us.

The whole process is wonderfully illustrated by the following excerpts from the rite that begins worship services in Lutheran churches, as printed in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*.[1] The pastor invites the congregation's confession and adoration by declaring God's fullness of forgiveness with these words from 1 John 1:8-9: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just

will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." That assurance is followed by a period of silence (during which worshipers may kneel) for reflection and self-examination. Then the pastor invites public confession by addressing the Trinity as "Most merciful God," after which all the worshipers together make this common admission to God of their inability to fix themselves, of the completeness of their sinfulness, of their trust in God's pitying compassion, and of their desire to change and follow Jesus in His ways:

> *We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name. Amen*

The specificity and thoroughness of that confession leave no one out—not for the purpose of causing us to be discouraged, but so that we get rid of all our burdens and guilt, so that we can know we are utterly forgiven and cleansed. What a great relief it is, then, to hear the pastor announce to each one of us and all of us in the community together God's full remission, the Trinity's total pardon for all that separates us from God. The pastor asserts,

> *Almighty God, in his mercy, has given his Son to die for us and, for his sake, forgives us all our sins. As a called and ordained minister of the Church of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

Churches from different denominations have varying understandings of the roles of pastors, priests, or other ministers, and I am not insisting on the particulars of this rite. I set it down here, though, to emphasize that the work is God's, that it is the author-

ity of Christ that assures us of our perfect reconciliation with God. It is the Trinity who has accomplished all that needed to be done to secure that reconciliation and who continues always to make that reconciliation available to the whole world. Worship helps us discover these truths about God and helps us celebrate them more deeply.

Reconciliation with ourselves

Many of us are not reconciled with ourselves, because we carry around huge burdens of guilt. The value of rites such as the one sketched above is that they give us tangible experiences of being rescued from our sins. Furthermore, the ritual enables us to become more reconciled to ourselves in body and mind and will. In many denominations, worshipers kneel during the confession and rise with gladness after hearing the proclamation of forgiveness. Some people make the sign of the cross on their bodies as the triune name is pronounced, in order to touch their foreheads (mind), hearts (soul, will), and shoulders (actions, symbolized in biblical literature by arms and hands) with God's reconciling freedom.

These physical movements—and any others in which we might engage in worship, such as lifting of arms in prayer or standing to sing and sitting to listen—are all part of our loving response to the God whom we worship. We want, as Jesus said, to love the Lord our God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30). When we respond to the Trinity's reconciling work with such a holistic love, we experience and practice the unity of body and soul, mind and spirit, with which we were created.

In worship, we celebrate a God who so loved everything in the cosmos that Christ came to restore each creature to full relationship with the Godhead and with every other entity in the creation.

Reconciliation in the worshiping community

Some denominations, such as those affiliated with the Anglican communion, place the rite of confession and absolution just before the offering, in keeping with Matthew 5:23-24, which instructs us, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

In these churches the proclamation of forgiveness by the pastor or worship leader is immediately followed by the blessing, "The peace of the Lord be with you always" (to which most congregations respond, "And also with you"). This peace is then extended to others by everyone in the worshiping community. The goal is that the triune God who has reconciled us all to Himself will be glorified by the complete reconciliation of all those who are gathered to praise Him. It is blasphemy, rather than worship, if those of us who revel in God's restoration of our relationship with Him are at odds with one another. It is also a desecration of the Lord's Supper (which in many churches follows the offering) if we come to Christ's table of reconciliation without the unity that He has made possible.

Reconciliation with the world

When we gather for worship, we celebrate the kind of God we have, a God who so loved everything in the cosmos that Christ came to restore each creature to full relationship with the Godhead and with every other entity in the creation. The more we learn about this God and the more we adore the Trinity, the more we will be formed into the Lord's likeness and into Christ's yearning that all would be one. We will learn that God has both "reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18).

Therefore, we call into question the genuineness of our worship and the reconciliation that God has achieved if we do not work for justice in the world. We deny the unity of God's world if some are hungry while others are overfed. We shatter the reunification of the cosmos when peoples are at war with each other. As Amos trumpets the word of the Lord,

> *I hate, I despise your festivals,*
> *and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies….*
> *Take away from me the noise of your songs;*
> *I will not listen to the melody of your harps.*
> *But let justice roll down like waters,*
> *and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*
> *(Amos 5:21, 23-24)*

The invitation of a church's worship, then, is to take the presence of God which we have experienced there back into our daily lives, so that we yearn unceasingly for genuine reconciliation in the world and engage in practices that contribute to that focal concern. Thus the public, corporate worship of our reconciling God spills over into the continuing worship of each moment in our steadfastly reconciling lives.

Note

[1] *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 56.

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God's reconciliation work
A spiritual exercise for preachers

Allan Rudy-Froese

What I offer here is a spiritual exercise, designed especially for preachers, as a way to experience and ponder the reconciling work of God. My intention is not to provide strategies for preaching about reconciliation but rather to foster a spirituality of reconciliation that can serve as a theological foundation for preaching.[1]

This exercise is designed for a six-day period. A focal text, Ephesians 2:11-22, provides a window to your own spiritual pilgrimage, congregational life, and the act of preaching. You may want to use the guide for early morning mediation or even for a six-day retreat. The first day immerses you in the sound of these verses, and subsequent days pick up themes for reflection from this text. Each day includes a personal, congregational, or vocational insight to ponder and a hymn to sing. The endnotes suggest further reading.

Day 1. Immersing yourself in the spoken Word

Immerse yourself in the words of Ephesians 2:11-22.[2]

> *Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.*
>
> *For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,*

by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new human out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

We often read quickly and silently. The words above were written for the voice and the ear. They were not words on a page but sounds that filled the room where the early church met. I invite you to read this passage out loud as many times and in as many ways as you can think of today—and throughout the coming week. For preachers, those who vocalize the good news, a crucial way to understand any biblical text is through sound.

Recite these words when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Write them on your screen saver, post them on your refrigerator or your bathroom mirror, feel their rhythm as you walk. Try reading them as comedy or tragedy or melodrama or as the day's news. Repeat them when you are happy, sad, bored, excited. Look into the eyes of your significant other and say some of these words like you mean them. Commit to memory the phrases that you like most and repeat them aloud in the privacy of your car as you are running errands. Try including some of these words in your conversations with friends and church members.

Don't think too much for now—and do not run to your commentaries! Receive these words from Ephesians 2 as gift. By the end of the day, they will be in your heart, mind, and sinews.

Day 2. Seeing God at work reconciling

Reconciliation is God's work. It is not primarily a human action. In the first instance, it is not a strategy about which you do a PowerPoint presentation for your church. Reconciliation is not something we—even we preachers!—bring about. Reconciliation is God's work through Christ: it has been done, it is being done, and it will be done. The dividing wall of hostility has crumbled and is crumbling. Those far off and those near have come together, are coming together, and will come together around the cross, making a new humanity.

Reconciliation is not something we—even we preachers!—bring about. Reconciliation is God's work through Christ: it has been done, it is being done, and it will be done.

Today is devoted to pondering this aspect of reconciliation: God has been, is now, and will be at work making peace with you, reconciling those parts of you that are in endless contradiction and debate with one another. God is at work reconciling the relationships you have with others. God is at work reconciling members of your congregation to one another. Even those members who are far off—people who appear hostile to others in the church or to the church itself—in them, too, the Holy Spirit is at work.

The construction metaphor at the end of our passage confirms that the building has been erected. We may need to do some maintenance, but this building is already built: In Christ "the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God." Reconciliation, unity, and peace are not at first something that we make happen in the church. Reconciliation is already happening and will continue to happen. We are being built by the grace of God, in spite of the wreckage that is evident.[3]

Take it as sheer grace today that our God is a God of reconciliation. Look and listen for ways that God is reconciling the world. Let "There's a wideness in God's mercy" be your song for today.[4]

Day 3. Facing the paradox of reconciliation and conflict

That reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel is well and good, but the reality of conflict is evident daily in personal life, in

families, in the church, in the world around us at every level from local to global. We can say that God has been, is, and will continue to be reconciling people in the context of Christ, but how do we mesh this statement with the fact that walls are still standing, that people are still alienated from one another, that the far and near factions in our congregations are hostile to each other?

Hostility in the church is not a new issue. Pastors and priests through two millennia have preached and cared for souls in conflict in the church. I am comforted by the reality that the whole New Testament provides evidence of church conflict. Early church leaders did not preach and write in a vacuum or from an ivory tower; they proclaimed God's reconciling work among churches suffering from growing pains at the least, and engaging in all-out brawls at worst. For instance, the book of Ephesians was written to a real church with a real dividing wall. Early church leaders did not arrive on the scene with fresh conflict management degrees under their belts but with the gospel message of reconciliation. They did not present a strategy for reconciliation as much as *proclaim* God's reconciliation: God has destroyed the wall. Now what does this mean for our lives and our behavior?

We confront a paradox here, as we ponder both the work of God's reconciliation in the church (which has happened, is happening, and will happen), and the divisive character of churches of the past, present, and future.

We confront a paradox here, as we ponder both the work of God's reconciliation in the church (which has happened, is happening, and will happen), and the divisive character of churches of the past, present, and future. The gospel, as embodied and preached by Jesus or as lived and proclaimed by early church leaders, often led to conflict. Jesus said once that he came to divide (Luke 12:51-53). When Jesus enacted or preached good news, he faced conflict as a matter of course. For all its human interest, the news of the gospel doesn't always make people feel good; more often than not, it provokes hostility.

Justo L. González has studied early church conflicts in light of present tensions in multicultural churches. He notes that conflict is present in the church precisely because the walls of race, nation, and gender are broken down. Even if they meet under the banner of Christ, a gathering of Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, men

and women, eaters of meat and those who don't eat meat, is bound to include conflict. As González observes, "Rather than shying away from intercultural conflict, Christianity thrived at those edges where conflict was inevitable."[5] In other words, if you want to blame someone for conflicts in the church, blame the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit is gathering together the teen who raps as well as the classical musician, the wealthy and the impoverished, the organic farmer and the pesticide dealer, sparks are bound to fly. We can despair over these differences and thank God for the character of the church: this is where the Spirit is working!

Raise your voice in singing "Here in this place"[6] today, and laugh out loud as you ponder the motley collection of people the Holy Spirit has gathered to your congregation.

Day 4. Recognizing your own longing for reconciliation

We have habitual ways of understanding biblical stories. For instance, when we refer to the parable of the "Good Samaritan," we have already made some assumptions. In giving it that label, we have already defined what the story is about and named the character we will identify with. One of the joys of reading this parable to my children has been that they do not call it "The Good Samaritan Story" but "The Story of the Hurt Man." My children immediately identify with the man who was hurt rather than with the one who was good. They see themselves in the one who benefits from a compassionate and generous act, not in the rescuer. The story is not a lesson in morality for my children but a story that makes them happy because in it someone receives help, as they like to receive help.

As adults—and especially as Mennonite adults—we are quick to assume the role of the helper, the one who does good. Perhaps we do so because at some stage in our lives we start seeing the Bible as a guide to morality. That is hardly a bad thing, but we are missing much when all we are seeking in the Bible are strategies and models for human action. Do we see from the side of the good Samaritan, and other "good" doers in the stories of the Gospels, because we find it hard to be helped, to receive, to accept the reconciling grace of God? Do a 180-degree turn with your hermeneutic to consider what God is doing and how *you* are receiving God's compassion and generosity.

As preachers, we see the sentence "Jesus came and preached peace," and immediately we give ourselves a task: I must preach peace! There is much to say about our following Jesus in preaching peace and our doing what the good Samaritan did, but when we go there first, we have skipped a step. The step we miss is that Jesus' peace is directed to us, and that God's reconciliation is for us. Naming ourselves as broken recipients of God's reconciling work is the first step in preaching good news. It is easy for church leaders to say that we need to be about the work of reconciliation, or perhaps that others need reconciliation, when in fact what we need most is to recognize and receive the reconciling work of God in our own lives.[7]

Today ponder a time when you have received help or been forgiven. Recall a time when you were reconciled to someone from whom you had been estranged. Sing "Far, far away from my loving father."[8]

Day 5. The power of words

Preaching the good news is in and of itself a nonviolent, reconciling act. That "Jesus came preaching peace" has implications for preaching as a means for reconciliation. Along with healing and taking risky and loving actions, a primary way that Jesus came to us with the good news was by using words—by preaching. *What* he said was crucial. *That* he used words, that he used the medium of preaching to reconcile others to God and to one another, is significant. In striking contrast to others in his day, who used violence to try to protect and secure their religious convictions and institutions, Jesus used fragile words to confront hostile people and forces.

Paul, once a persecutor of Christians, became a preacher. He served God with words rather than a sword. People on the street were aware of his change of faith and his changed way of communicating that faith: "The one who was formerly persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy" (Gal. 1:21-22). Paul moved from persecution to preaching, from violence to nonviolence. It is not simply *what* Paul said about uniting Gentiles and Jews, rich and poor, men and women, that merits our attention. *That* he used words to accomplish his mission is key to understanding the close relationship between preaching and reconciliation.

We often wonder *what* we will say in the midst of church conflict, or *what* we might say from the pulpit if we were to do, say, a series of four sermons on reconciliation. But *that* we are preaching—using words and not violence—is significant. It is through the word that God works. According to our scriptures, God creates the world by uttering words in the dark. God reconciles God's self to us and us to one another with words that fade into the air and are written on our hearts. God works with this fragile medium to address the deepest human wounds, divisions, and longings.[9]

In striking contrast to others in his day, who used violence to try to protect and secure their religious convictions and institutions, Jesus used fragile words to confront hostile people and forces.

Today ponder your preaching as a nonviolent, reconciling activity. As you listen to yourself and others talk, note how words can divide and cause hostility. Note also how your words can bring about peace and reconciliation. Sing "What is this place."[10]

Day 6. Preaching reconciliation

Preaching about reconciliation is a good thing to do. But more than this, week after week preachers are those who dare to hear the Word and use words to speak God's peace to those far and near. A sermon *on* reconciliation may provide new strategies and even inspire. Conflict mediation techniques, family systems theories, personality tests, and other peacemaking resources are grist for our preaching mills and useful in all arenas where we seek to bring reconciliation. But a sermon that actually does the work of reconciliation, that allows those near and far off to experience and receive God's reconciliation, is quite a different thing.

A sermon is not an article or an essay. A sermon is an experience. A sermon is not primarily a mode of communication about a topic—biblical or other. A sermon is not so much a discourse *about* God or reconciliation or good news as an *experience of* the good news of God's reconciling work that has happened, is happening, and will happen.

We step into the pulpit every week with very little really. We stumble to the pulpit with as much need for the reconciling work of God as anyone else brings. We come as one of the motley crew

that the Holy Spirit in her humour and wisdom has assembled on this day. We utter words that vibrate in the air and in the eardrums of those assembled and are absorbed into the walls of the church and sometimes into the hearts and memories of those gathered. This is the place where God's Word, broken by the cross and then raised to new life, seeks to gather all within earshot. The Word sung and uttered gathers those near and far off, making us into a dwelling in which God lives. Our words join what God's Word has done, is doing, and will do. Thus reconciliation is happening and will happen.

Experience it! Believe it! Preach it![11] Let "How clear is our vocation, Lord" be your song for today.[12]

Notes

[1] Books and articles on how to preach and be a good pastor in the midst of conflict abound. See, for instance, William H. Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987). For a general understanding of the role of the pastor in the inevitable conflicts that are a part of church life, see Arthur Paul Boers, *Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behavior* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1999), and the classic by Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985).

[2] Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

[3] For an excellent theological book on God's reconciling work, see Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996). For an easier read, a book that could be used for a book study in your church, see Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

[4] *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (HWB) (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992), #145.

[5] Justo L. González, *For the Healing of the Nations: The Book of Revelation in an Age of Cultural Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999). This short and readable book would also serve well for group study.

[6] HWB #6.

[7] See chapters 8 and 9 of Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1997). A student of John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas, Campbell takes seriously ethics and the communal nature of the church. He reminds us that the church is not a reiteration of Jesus but derived from Jesus—a gift. We are followers of Christ and recipients of Christ's actions, but we are not necessarily called to do everything that Jesus did. In following Jesus, we ask not so much, "What would Jesus do?" but, "What would a disciple—a receiver of Jesus' reconciliation and grace—do?"

[8] HWB #139.

[9] On preaching as a nonviolent option, see Charles L. Campbell, *The Word before the*

Powers: An Ethic of Preaching (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 70–86.
[10] HWB #1.
[11] An excellent book that gets to the heart of our vocation as preachers of the Word and users of words in a society where words are paradoxically both meaningless and powerful is Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).
[12] HWB #541.

About the author

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Matthew 18 revisited

Tim Kuepfer

Few texts were more central to the life and faith of the early Anabaptists than Matthew 18:15-20. Yet, though this biblical text is one of the most frequently alluded to and quoted by our spiritual forebears of the sixteenth century, it is perhaps one of the texts most likely to make twenty-first century Mennonites cringe. Church discipline? Binding and loosing? What can excommunication and the ban possibly have to do with the good news of Jesus?

Then again, consider the standard church discipline exercised by the other church bodies of sixteenth-century Europe: imprisonment, torture, and even capital punishment. By comparison, as they attempted to obey this text the Anabaptists seem humane in merely excommunicating and shunning from fellowship an errant sister or brother.

Still, to our ears, statements such as the following by Menno Simons can sound harsh, even uncaring:

> *Some hold the idea concerning the ban that they want to avoid and shun not the excommunicated themselves but only their false doctrines and offensive lives. They say this and fail to notice how that they are already themselves fallen into false doctrine, for they make null and void the clear ordinance of Christ (Matt. 18:17).*
>
> *Shun all heretics (I refer to those who used to be of us) and apostates, according to the Word of the Lord; whether it be father, mother, wife, child, relative, or friend.... Whosoever loves anything more than his God, cannot be the disciple of the Lord.*[1]

We want to ask Menno: How could you expect a wife to refuse even to share her bed with her husband? How could you demand

that a father deny his backsliding son a place at the family table?

In their zeal to obey this text they called "the rule of Christ," some of our Anabaptist forebears seem to have paid insufficient attention to the context of Matthew 18:15-20. The purpose of this article is, first, to consider briefly the place of Matthew 18 within its context in the Gospel as a whole; second, to examine in more detail the context of this rule of Christ (18:15-20) within the entire chapter; and third, to revisit the specific instructions of this text with an eye open to its situation within its given context.

Matthew 18 in the context of Matthew's Gospel

Matthew boldly structures his Gospel as a new Pentateuch, in which he gathers and forms Jesus' sayings about God's new covenant inaugurated in Jesus into five major blocks of teaching. For the first evangelist, Jesus is the new Moses, who—in actions reminiscent of the first Moses on Mount Sinai—ascends a mountain to deliver the first book (5:1), and then again (24:3) for the fifth and final book. Jesus opens his new Torah with the Sermon on the Mount and its new covenant blessings (5:3-12); then he concludes his Pentateuch with the Olivet Discourse (chapters 23–25) and its woes pronounced on those who reject his new covenant (23:13-32). This is how the Torah of the first Moses also concludes: covenant blessings are promised to the obedient, and curses are pronounced on those who rebel against God's covenant.

The new covenant Jesus is inaugurating holds forth a new hierarchy: the least will be the greatest, the humblest the most exalted, the last first. The greatest in the kingdom is small, dependent, vulnerable, and needy.

The story of God's people after they receive the law is a story of rebellion against God's rule and God's covenant. But the prophet Jeremiah looked forward to a new covenant that would reestablish God's rule, a new covenant that would institute a new way of life marked by humility, forgiveness, and reconciliation (Jer. 31:34). Now, in this fourth book of Matthew's new Pentateuch (chapter 18), Jesus sets forth this very way of life promised by Jeremiah as the charter for the reign of God and its new covenant, which God is inaugurating through Jesus. Hence, the importance of chapter 18 to Jesus' kingdom proclamation can hardly be overstated. And how interesting that the Anabaptists so

aptly called this fourth book of Jesus' new Torah "the rule of Christ."[2]

Matthew 18:15-20 in the context of Matthew 18

Like most questions put to Jesus by the disciples in Matthew's Gospel, the one that opens chapter 18 is misguided, even obtuse. Who is the greatest in your kingdom? they ask Jesus. Who gets to be the most powerful and influential of all your bureaucrats? Jesus had confronted his disciples' wrongheaded thinking on this matter repeatedly. The new covenant Jesus is inaugurating redefines power, holds forth a new hierarchy: the least will be the greatest, the humblest the most exalted, the last first.[3] This time Jesus dramatizes his point, calling a little child to himself. The greatest in the kingdom is like this little child: small, dependent, vulnerable, and needy. In God's kingdom, the little ones are the great ones. And the measure of care that we, Jesus' followers, offer these greatest-neediest is the measure of our own standing in the kingdom established by God's new covenant. This is the theme of Matthew 18.[4]

The kingdom of heaven, then, is an entity—a place, a people, a society—that welcomes little children (18:2-5) and those like them, offering hospitality to these "little ones" (18:6) who are dependent, in need, and powerless. Unself-conscious, humble hospitality is a defining characteristic of Jesus' kingdom. Moreover, when Jesus' disciples humbly care for any such little one, they are, in fact, caring for Jesus himself (18:5).

Care for these little ones—the great ones in the kingdom—entails not only self-forgetful hospitality toward them, but also sensitivity that avoids offending them or causing them to stumble (18:6-9). The critical importance of this care not to offend is communicated by Jesus' extreme, even ruthless, language for those who run roughshod over these vulnerable ones. Jesus calls his followers to a radical protection of these needy great ones. He requires our passionate commitment to do all in our power both to protect their faith and to remove any obstacle to their belief, even to the point of amputating our hand or foot.[5]

But what if one of these little ones has been looked down on and despised (18:10)? What if this one has been so offended against that he or she wanders away like a lost sheep from the new

covenant community? Contemplate the heavenly Father's response, should this one's guardian angel have to report such an offence (18:11). The parable of the lost sheep is more familiar to us in the Lukan context of the parables of the lost coin and of the lost son (Luke 15). There it is the heavenly Father who passionately pursues the lost one. But in this context (18:12-14), Jesus is calling his disciples to love the wandering little one with the Father's ardent love. With the zeal of the Shepherd we are to pursue the one who has wandered away, the one who is lost, the neediest—greatest—one.

In God's kingdom, the little ones are the great ones. And the measure of care that we offer these greatest-neediest is the measure of our own standing in the kingdom. This is the theme of Matthew 18.

Notice how this fourth block of Jesus' new Torah is building toward a "crescendo of care."[6] First is a call to welcome the least-greatest (18:2-5). Next comes a stern warning against offending those in the community's care (18:6-9). And now follows a summons to search out and restore the little one who is wandering away from the ninety-nine (18:10-14).

But what if this wandering off involves offence against the community? What if this wandering includes public and serious sin against a fellow disciple? What will covenant-keeping care mean then? With these questions we come to our central text (18:15-20).

A closer look at Matthew 18:15-20

First, however, we consider how the preceding teaching of Jesus may help us. We recall that the person who has sinned against us is, in Jesus' eyes, a little one who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Caring for this person is the same as caring for Jesus himself. We recall that these little ones have guardian angels who represent them to the Father in heaven and watch God's face. How will that face respond, should we choose to despise this person?

When you approach this person to talk about his or her sin, remember that it would be better to have a massive millstone hung around your neck and for you to be dropped in the deep, deep sea, than to cause this little one to stumble. Remember that this person is the one lost sheep the Shepherd pursues passion-

ately. In God's eyes, this person you are being called to approach is the greatest! The crescendo of care evident in Matthew 18:1-14 prepares and equips us to listen and respond with integrity to the next paragraph, the rule of Christ or Torah of Jesus.

The first issue we approach in this paragraph is a textual question. Did Jesus say, "If your brother or sister sins against you" or simply, "If your brother or sister sins"? Is this text about my responsibility toward the person who has sinned *against me*, or more broadly, about my responsibility toward my sister or brother who has sinned *publicly*? Both readings are contested, and no clear scholarly consensus has emerged.

And the debate is not just academic. Will we not be in danger of becoming meddlers if we attempt to get involved every time we suspect that one of our sisters or brothers has trespassed? What would it mean to care for the erring disciple whose sin has no direct effect on my own life? Then again, is Jesus expecting victims who have been sinned against to put themselves into a potentially vulnerable situation by seeking reconciliation with the offender? And to go to that person alone, at that?

Seeking reconciliation with the offender is especially problematic when the sin was intentional and perhaps even repeated, when it has left us feeling powerless and removed our dignity. So is not Jesus' call to forgive seventy-seven times (18:22) dangerously disempowering for the battered wife, for example? And what shall we say of our tendency to try forgiving and forgetting too easily, offering sentimental toleration for the offence, when what we should be doing is confronting the guilty party? After all, if sin is the destructive force scripture insists it is, then do we not fail in our care for the wandering sister or brother if we merely forgive the sin without looking it straight in the face? So how are we to approach someone who may well choose not to listen, and who may, in fact, inflict fresh pain, perhaps push us even further to the margins? What does care for the wandering sheep, the little one (who may seem more like a big bully), look like then?

This paragraph's broader context (chapter 18) keeps before us the purpose of this brotherly or sisterly confrontation. The paragraph is not about maintaining the purity of the church (despite what far too many Anabaptists have believed, in the sixteenth century and more recently). Nor is this paragraph's concern

conflict resolution, although that may be a welcome by-product. Nor is this paragraph's purpose to make certain that everyone's dignity and rights remain intact. And its purpose is surely not to set forth rules for a proper excommunication. As in all that has preceded this paragraph, the concern here is for the care of the little ones, those who are in need or in trouble. Obedience to the words of Jesus in this text will mean pursuing exclusively the well-being, restoration, and wholeness of the person who has committed the wrong.

A second question emerging from this text concerns the reason for taking along one or two witnesses, should the first meeting fail to result in reconciliation. What exactly is entailed in "every matter" which is to be "established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (18:16 TNIV, quoting Deut. 19:15)? Is the purpose of this second step simply to up the ante, to tighten the screws on the offender?

Perhaps the Anabaptist leader Hans Denck was closer to the reason: "When you hear your brother say something that is strange to you do not immediately argue with him, but listen to see whether he may be right and you can also accept it. If you cannot understand him you must not judge him, and if you think that he may be in error, consider that you may be in greater error."[7] So the purpose for meeting together along with one or two others is to protect the person being approached as much as the one doing the approaching. Hence, of utmost importance is the choice of witnesses whose care and commitment extend to both parties, witnesses who will listen with sympathy in order to sort out what is actually going on.

The broader context of Matthew 18:15-20 keeps before us the purpose of this brotherly or sisterly confrontation: not the purity of the church or conflict resolution but care for the little ones, those in need.

A third difficulty with this text is Jesus' pronouncement of judgment toward recalcitrant offenders: "If they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (18:17). The big problem with this language is that Jesus did not share the extreme dislike that most of his compatriots fostered toward non-Jewish outsiders and those Jewish "traitors" who collaborated with their pagan oppressors for financial gain. What does it mean for Jesus to

lump the unrepentant offender with pagans and tax collectors? Matthew is not afraid to remind us that he had been a tax collector (10:3); perhaps he grins wryly as he records Jesus' command regarding the church's ultimate act toward the impenitent offender. Jesus does not say, "Treat the offender as *your compatriots* would treat pagans and tax collectors," but rather, "as *you* would." Is Jesus calling on his disciples to display the same gracious compassion and care for outsiders that he was so frequently accused of manifesting?

True, Jesus did not affirm the actions of the pagans and the tax collectors. "When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans," he said (6:7). And do not be like the tax collectors who love only those who love them (5:46). But here Jesus is not talking about how tax collectors and pagans act. He is telling us how his own followers should act toward them, and surely we should act toward them as Jesus did (see 9:10-11; 21:31-32). Compassionate welcome and table hospitality will be the obvious signs that we are embracing the unreconciled sister or brother with the same grace that our Lord extended toward these outsiders. Lest we miss the other side of this point, however, we must also acknowledge that the sister or brother is now an outsider. To pretend that reconciliation has happened when it has not would be unhelpful.

This rule of Christ contains one of only two references in all the Gospels to the *ekklēsia* (compare Matt. 16:18). The church together binds and looses with heaven's full authority. No mention is made of an ecclesial hierarchy whereby this authority is channelled. Rather, when the church gathers around the offending little one for the purpose of restoration and reconciliation, even when such care is rejected, and even when the church consists only of those two or three witnesses, there Jesus is present in a special way.

The final piece of context for this rule of Christ or Torah of Jesus seems especially concerned to prevent abuse of the rule in the hands of the disciplinarians.[8] So the final word is forgiveness. It is introduced again by one of those misguided questions from a disciple: How often should I forgive? How long do we continue to pursue this little one (who is still, from the perspective of the kingdom of God, the greatest)? Jesus' hyperbolic insistence on

unlimited and boundless forgiveness is probably an allusion to the contrasting arrogant claim of Cain's descendant Lamech to his rights of unlimited vengeance (Gen. 4:24). The way of Jesus is a polar opposite of the way of Lamech. And so, in this final section of chapter 18, the crescendo of care reaches a resounding climax. The profligacy of divine forgiveness demands our unqualified forgiveness offered to one another as the ultimate act of care for the little-great ones in God's kingdom.

Pastoral thoughts on translating theory into practice

When asked to take another look at Matthew 18, my instinctive response was, "Oh no, any text but *that* one." I have had too many experiences, personally and pastorally, in which an attempt to obey these words of Jesus has ended badly. The theory is good, but the practice of this text is so often unsatisfactory.

The foundational event and symbol of our faith, the cross of Christ, should emancipate us from any notion that reconciliation is an easy exercise.

The foundational event and symbol of our faith, the cross of Christ, should emancipate us from any notion that reconciliation is an easy exercise. The incalculable cost to God of reconciliation—the volitional and vulnerable laying bare of the divine heart to pain and grief as the path toward accomplishing our forgiveness and the restoration of shalom—should lead us to give up our illusions about finding quick fixes. In N. T. Wright's words, the way to reconciliation announced here by Jesus is "severely practical as well as ruthlessly idealistic: not a bad combination."[9] Or in John Howard Yoder's trenchant summation: This text "gives more authority to the church than does Rome, trusts more to the Holy Spirit than does Pentecostalism, has more respect for the individual than humanism, makes moral standards more binding than puritanism, is more open to the given situation than the 'new morality.'"[10] And—we might add—it reflects more commitment to the formation of reconciled and reconciling Christian community as a sign of God's kingdom than Anabaptism has shown.

Though they didn't put it exactly in these terms, surely our Anabaptist forebears were correct in insisting that this rule of Christ is a fundamental tenet in the manifesto of God's approach-

ing kingdom. It is a central pillar in the charter of the new covenant, Jesus' new Torah, established in this new Moses. I have attempted to demonstrate that this rule's context reveals the nature of the power and authority that embody God's reign. At the heart of its power is the force of humble forgiveness. At the centre of its authority is sacrificial, self-forgetful care for the least of these. May we too commit ourselves unswervingly to this rule of Christ by our care of the little ones who are greatest in the kingdom.

Notes

[1] "A Clear Account of Excommunication, 1550," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, c. 1496–1561* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956, 1984), 457, 472.
[2] Note that the semantic range employed here for *rule* encompasses both "command" and "sovereignty."
[3] Matt. 20:20-28; Mark 9:33-37; 10:35-45; Luke 9:46-48; 22:24-27.
[4] For more in-depth development of this theme, see Jeffrey A. Gibbs and Jeffrey Kloha, "'Following' Matthew 18: Interpreting Matthew 18:15-20 in Its Context," *Concordia Journal* 29 (January 2003): 6–25.
[5] Here Jesus once again employs stock Semitic exaggeration to make his point forcefully. See also verse 6. For a few other examples of Jesus' frequent use of hyperbole, see Matt. 5:29-30; 7:3-5; 8:20.
[6] This evocative phrase is taken from Gibbs and Kloha, "'Following' Matthew 18," 7.
[7] Hans Denck, "Concerning the Love of God," 1526, in *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Resources*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Kitchener, ON, and Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 216.
[8] W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr. consider verses 15-20 to be the central paragraph of chapter 18, with the paragraphs preceding and following it a buffer of sorts, to prevent misunderstanding and misapplication of this text. See *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, vol. 2 (New York: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 751.
[9] N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part Two: Chapters 16–18*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 2004), 34.
[10] John Howard Yoder, "Binding and Loosing," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

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Forgiveness

Joseph Liechty

Search for writings on reconciliation and forgiveness published before the late 1980s, and you are likely to find only a few items, most of them theological reflections on the relationship between God and humanity, without clear relevance for politics, society, or even actual damaged personal relationships, within the church or elsewhere. The dramatic increase in publications on forgiveness and reconciliation since then is easy to explain as the result of the ethnic, national, and religious conflicts that have come to the fore in the aftermath of the Cold War. When retreating to be among one's own people is not an option either during or after conflict (think Northern Ireland, the Balkans, and South Africa, among many others), then a capacity to live as neighbors—to be reconciled—with those who are or have been your enemies becomes the essential peace skill and goal. And everywhere, issues of ethnic, national, and religious identity have come to the fore, accompanied by the challenge of living at peace with difference.

When is forgiving appropriate, and when should we withhold it? Must repentance precede forgiveness? Sound answers require an adequate understanding of the relationship between repenting, forgiving, and reconciliation.

This profusion of literature, however, has brought little clarity about what we mean by reconciliation and forgiveness or about how they work. The confusion, which can involve both intellectual muddle and existential pain, often expresses itself in the form of these vexed questions: When is forgiving appropriate, and when should we withhold it? Must repentance precede forgiveness? That is, is repenting a necessary condition of forgiveness? Sound answers require an adequate definition of reconciliation, and especially an adequate understanding of the relationship between repenting, forgiving, and reconciliation. We need an account of forgiveness that distinguishes between preemptive and

responsive aspects, and an understanding of love that respects both a boundless will to love and its strategic application.[1]

Forgiveness and reconciliation

While some see reconciliation and forgiveness as independent and others see them as synonymous, I find it more coherent and powerful to understand forgiveness as fundamentally and ideally an aspect of reconciliation. Reconciliation is the process of healing and restoring broken relationships of all types; it attempts to close the gap between what a relationship is and what it ought to be. While every type of relationship, even every relationship, may require a slightly different form of reconciliation, common to all reconciliation will be the actions of repenting and forgiving—repenting on the part of perpetrators and forgiving by victims. When perpetrator and victim have accomplished these in a satisfactory way that is accepted by the other, their relationship may be said to be reconciled.

The personal benefits that result from forgiving can be considerable. But nothing is gained and much can be lost by making those benefits the primary purpose of forgiving, by removing forgiveness from the context of reconciliation.

Understanding forgiving as an action in reciprocal relationship with repenting, with both directed toward the end of reconciliation, may seem to stand opposed to an approach that has become conventional wisdom in some circles: I forgive not so much for the perpetrator or for our relationship as for myself, to release myself from hatred and antagonism that will bind and diminish me. In one sense, the opposition is deliberate and strong: a Western society endlessly inventive in creating refinements of narcissism hardly needs one more way of serving self, least of all by shrinking to its own withered dimensions an action long understood as serving relationships. But the right connection in forgiveness between its relational direction and the personal benefit deriving from it is more complicated than that. First, the personal benefits that result from forgiving can be real and considerable. We should recognize, even celebrate, these benefits. But nothing is gained and much can be lost by making those benefits the primary purpose of forgiving, by removing forgiveness from the context of reconciliation.

The emphasis on the personal benefits of forgiving can also reflect a second truth, that even when forgiving and repenting are directed toward their proper end of reconciliation, nothing guarantees success. Not every wound can be healed, and not even the most wholehearted forgiving and repenting will always be reciprocated by the other party. People working in pastoral or therapeutic situations may more often than not encounter situations in which the relationship is simply irretrievable, and healing the individuals involved is the most one can hope for. When reconciliation is impossible or when it fails, the healing benefits that can accrue from forgiving and repenting are a just and wonderful compensation. But the accompanying benefits are not the general or primary purpose.

Forgiving as letting go

An analysis of the dynamics of forgiveness brings us to an essential distinction, between expressions of forgiveness that are preemptive, initiating, and even risk-taking, and those that respond to initiatives others have taken. One fundamental aspect of preemptive forgiving is forgiving as letting go. Christians readily understand this aspect of forgiveness, because it corresponds closely with the New Testament meaning of *aphiēmi*, the Greek word usually translated as "forgive." For many others in modern Western societies, letting go also corresponds with therapeutic understandings of forgiving. Which raises a crucial question: what exactly do we let go of? Answers vary, with anger and hatred being among the most common. While a good case could be made for either or both, I prefer to start with what the theologian Donald Shriver, working from his experience and observation of the U.S. civil rights movement, calls "forbearance of vengeance": to forgive is, in the first instance, to let go of the right to vengeance.

Recognizing forbearance of vengeance as the beginning of forgiveness has at least two important advantages. First, forgiveness is best understood not as a single, simple act but as a process of coming to terms with injury, insult, and injustice; thus, different expressions of forgiveness will be possible and appropriate at stages along the way. As a first step in forgiving, then, I decide what *not* to do: I have no idea yet what I am going to do, but I am

not going to seek vengeance. This initial decision—not to seek vengeance—may well coincide with the most intense feelings of anger and hatred, and yet it is the foundational step from which everything else will follow, including overcoming or transforming anger and hatred.

If those of us observing a conflict fail to recognize and honor this decision (and sometimes it is less a conscious choice than an impulse—from God only knows where), we may discourage those doing the forgiving. Knowing what they have not yet forgiven—knowing the anger and hatred that remain—they may fail to recognize the enormous significance of what they have already done in forbearing vengeance. We may need to acknowledge that the work of forgiveness is not finished—while pointing out that what they have already done is huge, and it is enough for now.

To forgive is, in the first instance, to let go of the right to vengeance. As a first step in forgiving, I decide what *not* to do: I have no idea yet what I am going to do, but I am not going to seek vengeance.

Forgiving does not mean letting go as an unqualified, general posture, or letting go of everything. What we should never let go of, assuming it is well founded, is the justice claim or moral judgment that made forgiveness an option in the first place; forgiveness is a way of pursuing justice, not the abandonment of justice. After all, if forbearing vengeance is the first act of forgiving, it only makes sense in light of a prior judgment: that an injustice warranting vengeance has been committed, so there is a right to vengeance that can be forborne. Shriver identifies the first of four key markers characterizing a process of political forgiveness (the marks work just as well for interpersonal forgiveness) as "judgment against a wrong perpetrated."

We confuse the issue of what we are letting go of when we use certain language often associated with forgiving. For example, if a person asks forgiveness for abusive behavior, we might offer it by saying, "That's all right." Taken literally, the words are morally hideous: Unjust, abusive behavior is all right? It is acceptable? It doesn't matter? What we actually mean is something like, "I am willing to consign your abuse to the past, so that it does not dictate the nature of our relationship, and we can be reconciled." Nothing will ever make injustice all right. But forgiveness can

offer the miracle of freeing us from being bound by the past and letting us move forward together.

A second advantage of understanding forbearing vengeance as the foundational act in forgiveness is that it allows us to position forgiveness properly in relationship to vengeance. Clearly, forgiving is an alternative, even a radical alternative. But Paul Keim and I are coming to believe, through our work on vengeance and forgiveness, that it is possible to diminish the value and appeal of forgiveness by overstating or making too comprehensive the way in which it is an alternative. At the extreme, vengeance and forgiveness may be understood as occupying two moral economies so radically different that the people working in them are practically different species, or at least as different as saints and sinners, so that the behavior of one is irrelevant to the other. And be sure that in these circumstances, most people will understand vengeance as the normal response, all but dictated by human nature, while forgiveness will be understood as effectively supernatural—perhaps admirable, perhaps not, but an oddity of little relevance for ordinary people.

Forgiveness is a way of pursuing justice, not the abandonment of justice. If forbearing vengeance is the first act of forgiving, it only makes sense in light of a prior judgment that an injustice has been committed.

This perception of forgiveness as otherworldly is in the first instance simply unfortunate, effectively depriving people captivated by vengeance of the forgiveness option. This perception also does not square with some important evidence. First, many people struggling with their responses to injury, insult, and injustice do not simply and comprehensively opt for either vengeance or forgiveness; they experience conflicting desires and go back and forth in their thoughts and actions. Second, in a tragic situation I am unable to anticipate with any confidence who will forgive and who will not. If I work backward from their forgiveness, looking for aspects of their experience that may have made forgiving possible or even likely, I can usually find some indicators. But often enough, I discover other people of similar background and experience who respond so differently that I doubt whether one can isolate factors correlating with the likelihood of forgiving. People who act in wonderfully forgiving ways, it seems,

are usually quite ordinary in every other way. Far better then, to posit forgiveness and vengeance as competitors within the single moral economy of human responses to injury, insult, and injustice, both pursuing justice and both seeking to give victims a way to go forward.

Further intriguing evidence comes from an Amish community's forgiveness after the murder of five school girls in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, in fall 2006. In this case, Amish forgiveness was quick, sweeping, and clearly driven by a deep need to forgive. That need was especially striking because it manifested itself at just the stage when many in our society would feel a compulsion toward vengeance.

Two main ways of interpreting the evidence suggest themselves. If vengeance is a core human need, then the Amish appear to be otherworldly and irrelevant, a people who have somehow managed to deny what nature demands. But we have no reason to believe that the Amish differ from other people in their nature. They grieved in their own way, but they felt their terrible loss just as the rest of us would feel it. We may instead see their forgiveness as countering the idea that vengeance is somehow an inevitable human need, a default position. The universal human need may be the necessity of finding a way of moving forward in the aftermath of tragedy, but how we move on may be to a high degree socially constructed. Many societies construct responses that make vengeance normative, and members of those societies feel it as a need. In the Amish reality, forgiveness is normative, even felt as a need. So understood, the Nickel Mines story emphasizes the extent to which vengeance and forgiveness are alternatives in the moral economy of human responses to injury, insult, and injustice.

Forgiveness as love given before

The second expression of preemptive forgiving is forgiveness as love given before—that is, as love given before it is deserved, probably before it is asked for, perhaps before the perpetrator recognizes any need for it. The biblical stories of Zacchaeus and the prodigal son illustrate forgiving as love given before. Jesus treats Zacchaeus lovingly before Zacchaeus has made any changes that would seem to warrant such treatment. And the father welcomes the prodigal with a warmth of love far exceeding what

the prodigal had any right to expect. These stories also illustrate a feature sometimes shared by forgiving as letting go—we recognize forgiveness as a certain way of acting even when (as in these stories) the word *forgiveness* is not used.

Forgiving as love given before is closely related to forgiving as letting go. Love given before makes it clear that all forgiving, at least in a Christian framework, is a form and expression of love. While letting go indicates that forgiving involves options not taken, principally vengeance and the actions and stances associated with it, love given before identifies love as the action, attitude, and motivation that will replace vengeance. Love given before indicates that in the moral economy of human responses to injury, insult, and injustice, forgiveness will try something different: the victim is going to respond, unexpectedly, by injecting love into the system.

Love given before indicates that in the moral economy of human responses to injury, insult, and injustice, forgiveness will try something different: the victim is going to respond, unexpectedly, by injecting love into the system.

These two expressions of forgiveness are also tied together because preemptive love is often expressed in letting go of something. In the stories of Zacchaeus and the prodigal son, Jesus and the father let go of the rights and stances associated with those in positions of honor and status. Similarly, from the beginning of the forgiving process, letting go and love given before are bound together by forbearance of vengeance, which simultaneously names what is going to be let go of—vengeance—and identifies the forgiveness-initiating act of love.

The practice of forgiveness is grounded in an understanding of love that views it as an action while also respecting powerful feelings of love and the calculated, strategic application of love. Working from but simplifying M. Scott Peck's influential definition in his bestselling *The Road Less Traveled*—"Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth"[2]—I generally define love as "the will to extend oneself for the good of another." This definition can accommodate the feeling of love but does not require it, which allows for those instances when a person wills to act lovingly even when loving feelings are absent.

Sometimes, however, forgiving does not involve conflicting desires; it flows, so far as is humanly possible, from a perfect conjunction of will, desire, conviction, faith, and feeling. We occasionally see something like it in what Mennonite scholar Gerald Biesecker-Mast affectionately calls the Mennonite legacy of "knee-jerk forgiveness." Surely this is part of the explanation for the Amish forgiveness at Nickel Mines. Wherever it is found, this overflowing will to forgive should be honored, because so much good can come of it. But even the most purely motivated and powerful will to forgive is best implemented thoughtfully, even strategically, because purity of intent does not always yield good results. A powerful example is the feminist critique of the kind of forgiveness that sends an abused spouse back to the abuser. In deploring the consequences we need not doubt the forgiver's intent.

Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf offers a simple but powerful way of honoring both the will to forgive and the necessity of forgiving thoughtfully. The will to embrace (his metaphor for reconciliation, which may surely be extended to forgiveness and all forms of love) may be absolute, unqualified, unconditional, and limitless, he says, but the act of embrace must be considered, calculated, strategic. That acts of love must be strategic should not surprise us. Parents discover that although our love for our children can make us wish we could give them everything they want, acting on these impulses would not be good for them. The Mennonite response to famine in Ethiopia in the 1980s was to give generously, shipping as much food as possible, but Mennonite Central Committee workers on the ground knew that some of those shipments depressed food prices in Ethiopia and hindered planting the next crop. Some food even went to mafia-like organizations rather than to hungry people. Acting in a loving way meant thinking strategically. In fact one could reasonably interpret MCC's work around the world as a massive set of calculations about how to love well in church, social, and political arenas.

Taking a break as I write this paper, I pick up the *Chicago Tribune* (5 March 2007) and read an article about a Lutheran congregation in Reno, Nevada, deciding how to respond to a convicted sex offender who wants to participate in their church

and in fact regards it as part of his rehabilitation. The associate pastor says, "Clearly, we are called to love. But is it safe to love this particular person up close?" Whatever the answer, the congregation would be wrong not to ask some version of this question about what love means in this case. Being strategic about how to love does not contradict love; it is a necessary expression of love.

Forgiveness as absolution

If letting go and love given before are the preemptive and risk-taking aspects of forgiveness, a third element, crucial but distinct, also needs to be named. It is absolution, a response to honest repentance by a perpetrator and therefore the deal-sealer in the reconciliation process. In one sense, absolution may be best understood not as a separate element of forgiveness but as the final act of letting go and the final act of love (now given after rather than before). In forgiveness as absolution, the wronged party indicates an intention not to bear grudges.

It is useful to name absolution separately from letting go and love given before, partly because absolution is a response, not an initiative, and partly because it is the source of difficulties in interpreting and acting on forgiveness. The difficulties arise principally because people too frequently equate forgiveness with absolution, a particular and limited aspect of forgiveness. Failing to make this distinction contributes to difficulties in answering the vexed questions I asked earlier: When is forgiving appropriate, and when should it be withheld? Must repentance precede forgiveness; that is, is repenting a necessary condition of forgiveness?

Absolution may be best understood not as a separate element of forgiveness but as the final act of letting go and the final act of love (now given after rather than before).

The answers depend, of course, on which aspect of forgiveness one is talking about. Letting go and love given before can, in theory, be applied appropriately at any point in a conflict and in any relationship. Forgoing vengeance is always appropriate, as is loving, although in many cases it will be best acted on with care and deliberation about likely effects and outcomes, rather than as a simple reflexive action. Absolution, on the other hand, with its strong religious overtones of releasing the guilty party from the consequences of

sin, and thus putting an end to the matter, will ordinarily be appropriate only at the end of a reconciliation process, as a response to repentance.

Whether forgiving and repenting need to proceed in a particular order likewise depends on which aspect of forgiving is involved. Again, absolution should normally follow repentance. If absolving means releasing from the consequences of sin, doing so consistently—and without regard to whether the guilty party has repented—could bring forgiving into contempt, as a form of cheap grace. Letting go and love given before require no prior repentance, however, and in fact their power to bring change lies in their preceding repentance. Setting absolution aside, repenting may inspire forgiving, or forgiving may inspire repenting. Such is their power, that repenting and forgiving can work past all kinds of misconceptions to achieve reconciliation. But sometimes clear understanding can serve good practice.

Notes

[1] Some of the ideas in this essay have been developed at greater length in Joseph Liechty, "Putting Forgiveness in Its Place: The Dynamics of Reconciliation," in *Explorations in Reconciliation: New Directions in Theology*, ed. David Tombs and Joseph Liechty (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006); other ideas have been influenced by research on vengeance with my Goshen College colleague, Paul Keim.

[2] M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values, and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 81.

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Through conflict to authentic community

Reconciliation in the congregation

Nan Cressman

Autumn sunshine poured through the windows of the church basement, lighting the faces of those gathered for the Saturday workshop on "Dealing with Differences in the Family of Faith." In an introductory exercise, I asked each participant to find a partner and complete this sentence by sharing their own experience: "I find I do best in a conflict situation when …" Around the room people paired off and began animated conversations. Their lively talk continued to fill the hall as they proceeded to complete the next sentence: "The Christian teaching that most informs my stance toward conflict is …"

But silence fell when I introduced the beginning of the last sentence in the exercise: "One time when I saw or experienced reconciliation within a congregation was …" Eventually, a few quiet voices could be heard, then a few more. As people recounted their stories, faces lightened, listeners leaned close. We all wanted to hear about those rare moments when conflict was transformed, when disagreements were somehow turned into strengthened relationship, creative problem solving, healing, and growth. In these cases, how was conflict transformed into reconciliation? What were the turning points along the way? How did the journey unfold?

The kind of Christian community that can find its way to reconciliation on the other side of bitter conflict is one in which people speak the truth to each other.

Reconciliation, it seems to me, is the hoped-for destination of a journey through conflict. Sometimes in my work in church conflict transformation, I have the privilege of seeing a congregation arrive there. More often, the journey is partial. On occasion, I consider the travel successful even if it is only begun. Many of us in the church are so afraid of conflict that to openly address it in any helpful way is a Spirit-graced feat.

We're terrified of conflict, yet we yearn for authentic Christian community. Congregations that at one time or another have reached the destination know that you can't easily have the latter without the former, because the kind of Christian community that can find its way to reconciliation on the other side of bitter conflict is one in which people speak the truth to each other. This is something the apostle Paul says we need to do, because "we are members of one another" (Eph. 4:25). His next words are, "Be angry." Speaking our truth, being real, may involve conflict.

But that's not necessarily a bad thing. It is in our times of conflict that God can most easily get our attention, break in, and do a new thing among us. There is wisdom in the saying, "If you're making change, expect conflict." When God changes, stretches, and transforms the church, we should expect conflict.

Think back over your adult life for a moment, to a period of intense emotional or spiritual growth. Did conflict have any part in it? Was there conflict within you, or between you and others? What is true for us individually is also true for the church.

Conflict is a part of authentic community, a part of change, and a part of growth. But for conflict to become life-giving, we need to be intentional in how we make use of it.

Principles for engaging congregational conflict constructively

When I ask congregations that have succeeded in engaging conflict constructively, "What advice would you give other congregations?" several common principles emerge:

Work at lowering people's fear of conflict at church. Normalize it. Highlight examples of people in the Bible who worked out their differences successfully—and not so successfully. Note that conflict was a normal part of Jesus' life, and the life of the early church. It has been a normal part of the Christian life ever since.

Use the resources of our faith. Pray for guidance and grace. Sing hymns and songs that speak of God's constancy. Explore the Christian scriptures through the lens of conflict resolution, looking for principles and practices to adopt in your own setting.

Don't ignore conflict. Expect it. Watch for it. Welcome it, and prepare your congregation with strategies and skills to use it.

Catch it small. According to Matthew 18:15 and Matthew 5:23-24, whoever first becomes aware of a breach in relationship

is responsible to go to the other and seek reconciliation. This instruction applies if you are the one sinned against or the one who remembers, at the altar in Jerusalem, that someone three days' walk back in Galilee has something against you.

Deal directly. The scriptures above suggest not only that we act as soon as we become aware of a breach, but that we do so, first of all, by going directly to the other or others involved to try to work it out. If Christians actually did this, 80 percent of my work would vanish. Congregations that succeed at reconciliation provide guidelines, training, and support for addressing difficulties one on one.

Scriptures suggest that as soon as we become aware of a breach, we go directly to the others involved to try to work it out. If Christians did this, 80 percent of my work would vanish.

Take responsibility for your own contribution to the difficulty. Luke 6:41-42 instructs us to start by examining and correcting our own actions, words, and attitudes. Only then do we attend to the others' contribution.

Practice respectful communication. In Matthew 18:15, Jesus says that if your brother or sister can hear you, you've won him or her back into right relationship. We make it easier for the other to hear us by speaking only for ourselves, and by speaking in specific terms about our take on the most recent example of the difficulty between us. It's true that Paul tells us to be angry (Eph. 4:26), but he qualifies these words by instructing us not to sin in our anger, and not to let the sunset find us still nursing it. We're to be direct, respectful, and specific in sharing our experiences, emotions, and preferences for the future—and then we're to let the anger go.

Model these practices. Especially if you are a person in a position to influence others within the church, your modelling is a powerful force for health or hindrance.

Welcome disagreement. Assume that God has blessed the congregation, for its up-building and growth, with people of widely differing perspectives, needs, theologies, experiences, gifts, skills, preferences, and maturity levels. Assume that one of the ways the Spirit speaks to the church is through the gathered body. Design feedback loops and decision-making processes that encourage all members to helpfully share their insights, ideas, and wisdom with the church. Acts 15 provides a useful model: people speak out of

their life experience and understanding of scripture, listen carefully, and build consensus. Develop and agree on norms for your interaction with one another and hold yourselves to a high standard of mutual respect and civility.

Help each other work through conflict. In the Gospels and in the writings of Paul, we see that we are not to leave our Christian brothers and sisters to suffer through conflict alone. We are to come alongside them and help them. Matthew 18:16-17 suggests that the church needs to be prepared to offer mediation, and then arbitration, if people are unable to find reconciliation on their own. In Philippians 4:2, we see Paul locating help for two women in conflict. He requests that a fellow church member, whom he addresses as "loyal companion," give them a hand.

Design decision-making processes that encourage all members to helpfully share their insights, ideas, and wisdom with the church. Hold yourselves to a high standard of mutual respect and civility.

In 1 Corinthians 6, the corporate mandate to help others is even stronger. There, two men are taking each other to court. Paul doesn't chastise them for having a dispute, but he has harsh words for others in the congregation who are leaving these men with no recourse but the secular courts as a forum for addressing their conflict. Is it possible, he writes, that there is not a single person in your fellowship wise enough to settle a dispute between believers? "I say this to your shame" (1 Cor. 6:5). Paul is concerned not so much about the existence of conflict in the church but about how the conflict is being addressed. The church needs to offer help to Christians in conflict. Paul notes that when one suffers, we all suffer, because we're members of one body (1 Cor. 12:26). We are all entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18).

Stories of engaging congregational conflict constructively

What follows are several stories about how congregations today have put into practice some of these scriptural principles.[1]

Busting gossip. First Church prided itself on being a historic peace church. Unfortunately, a consequence seemed to be that people at First would not raise concerns with each other, lest they disturb the peace. Instead, they shared their concerns, complaints, and hurts with anyone except those who could actually address

them. The leadership at First hosted a series of "Speaking the Truth in Love" workshops. The trainer led them in exploring the biblical mandate for direct communication. They practiced speaking for themselves and being specific, and they renewed their skills in active listening. Together they decided under what conditions it would be appropriate to confront another directly, acknowledging that in some cultures and situations intentional indirect communication would be preferable, and they practiced those skills. Because it's not so much gossips but amplifiers—those who pass gossip along—that subvert direct communication, the group also did role-plays in which they responded to indirect communication by using these "gossip-busting questions" outlined by Speed Leas, a specialist in conflict management for religious organizations. When person A is telling you about his or her concern about person B, ask:

1. "Have you talked to B about this?"
2. "How can I help you prepare to talk with B about it?"
3. If you are someone who is trusted by both A and B, you might ask, "Would you like me to get you and B together and help you talk about this?"
4. Otherwise, you could ask, "Would you like me to pass your concern along to B, with your name attached, and invite B to get back to you?"
5. If A's answer to all of the above is "No," then say, "Well, it's your call. Let me know if you change your mind."

The members of First Church had fun and found that the training left them feeling encouraged, equipped, and empowered to communicate directly with more skill and less fear.

Practicing holy manners. The Session of Knox Church knew that the personal attacks which passed as "forceful presentation of issues" in session meetings were making those meetings unproductive and unpleasant. They also knew that what members of the session modelled had an influence on how others in the church interacted. The evidence was audible in the accusing and dismissive ways church members spoke to one another when they disagreed.

The session decided to clean up their act. First they took some time in each meeting to study Gilbert Rendle's *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences*.[2]

Then they agreed on guidelines for their interaction as elders. Part of their covenant was a commitment to talk about their own experience and understanding, using the word *I*. They would not talk about "everyone" or "some people." Further, when speaking of concerns about others or the congregation, they would use descriptive words, not evaluative ones. Posting their covenant on the wall of their meeting room, reading it aloud at the start of each meeting, and holding one another to it created a sense of safety in their meetings that allowed creativity to flourish and transformed their relationships. Finally, they shared the covenant with the congregation and invited others to apply these disciplines when they brought concerns to church leaders.

The next time a letter from an angry parishioner arrived, the session returned it with a reminder of the guidelines and a request that she rewrite it using descriptive I-language. To their amazement, the writer was grateful for a chance to express her concern more grace-fully. She had regretted her angry tone as soon as she'd dropped the letter in the mailbox. Moreover, she deeply appreciated the respect the session displayed in their request—respect for her, for the person who was the object of her concern, and for the welfare of the church. She said she felt pastored by their care.

Instituting feedback loops. The leadership of St. Mark's kept feeling blind-sided. Every time things seemed to be running smoothly, a congregational crisis would explode in their faces. Factions would form, relationships would suffer, ministry would slow. Lurching from crisis to crisis left them exhausted. They needed to find a way to stay in touch with the congregation and get problems out into the open while the conflicts were still manageable. Thus began St. Mark's quarterly Speak-Easy. The leaders decided to host a potluck lunch after worship every three months, for which the ministers baked desserts. Childcare after lunch allowed parents to participate in the Speak-Easy, an open-agenda congregational meeting. In small and large groups, adults and teens reflected on the successes and challenges of the past quarter, and those anticipated in the coming quarter.

The chair kept notes on flip charts in front of the group, so no ideas would be lost. She invited participants to share their disagreement: "We have forty-two people in this room. I assume that means we have forty-two different experiences of life at St. Mark's.

We need to hear them all if we're to get a broad understanding of what's before us." "We all seem to be in agreement. If you have a different opinion, we especially need to hear from you now." Holding a Speak-Easy once each quarter means that people at St. Mark's have a chance to raise red flags when concerns are at the stage of what veteran pastor and conflict management trainer John Savage calls a "pinch" rather than a "crunch." No one needs to sit on a concern for more than thirteen weeks before raising it publicly for discussion and action.

Other churches, facing the same need, regularly publicize the names and phone numbers of people serving on a Listening Committee, who invite congregants to direct ideas and concerns to appropriate parties, with the help of committee members. Some congregations post clearly designated steps, frequently reiterated, for bringing concerns forward in writing. Others gather signed semiannual surveys. Some church councils inform the congregation about key issues they'll be dealing with in upcoming months and invite input. All of these methods say: "Disagreement and conflict are normal and expected here. This is how we express them responsibly and use them constructively."

As we explore, identify, and share with one another the things that make for peace, the ministry of reconciliation will flourish among us, and we'll have plenty of stories to tell.

Acting as loyal companions. Something was going on between Esther and Luella, valued matriarchs at Grace Church. They used to be the best of friends. Now their hostility for each other was barely concealed. The women's group had become a battle zone, with older members choosing sides and younger women staying home to avoid the oppressive atmosphere. Pastor Rhonda puzzled about what to do. Both Esther and Luella were proud women. In the past, when Rhonda had sensed that either of them had a problem, her queries had been briskly rebuffed. Still, those difficulties had never had this kind of fallout, which was affecting the ministry Rhonda was trying to build with the young women of the church. If she addressed the tension openly, she was sure both Esther and Louella would deny that anything was wrong. Rhonda decided just to pay attention and watch for the right moment to intervene.

Within a week there was a funeral at the church. At the reception afterward, Rhonda had a chance to observe Esther and Luella in the kitchen. When one entered, the other would leave. They did not speak or make eye contact. Rhonda had what she needed. The next day she stopped in to visit Luella and described her observations. "I care for both you and Esther," she said, "and I know you used to be good friends. I'm having a hard time putting that together with what I saw yesterday. Please help me understand." When Luella finished her explanation, Rhonda asked if she would be open to meeting with Esther to talk about the problem, with help from Rhonda and an elder of their choice. Luella assured her that she would be willing, but that Esther would never agree. "That may be, but if she does, would you?" With Luella's agreement in hand, Rhonda visited Esther, again described her observations, and again offered help.

By simply describing what she saw and heard between them, Rhonda was able to get past their denial, resistance, and embarrassment. If the need arose, she could have also described the fight-or-flight responses she was observing in the women's group. Her willingness to intervene as a companion to Esther and Louella led to new understanding, respect, forgiveness, and ultimately reconciliation—the building of a new, more resilient relationship between the two women.

When have *you* seen or experienced reconciliation within a congregation? When it occurred, it did not happen by accident. What made it possible? My hope is that as we explore, identify, and share with one another the things that make for peace, the ministry of reconciliation will flourish among us, and we'll have plenty of stories to tell.

Notes

[1] Names of congregations and individuals in these stories have all been changed.
[2] Gilbert R. Rendle, *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences* ([Bethesda, MD]: Alban Institute, 1999).

About the author

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Considering consensus
Is agreement possible?

Kerry Strayer

A large congregation debated long and vigorously about whether to use church funds to construct an addition to their building. Finally, after 70 percent of those assembled voted for the addition, one man who had been vocal in his opposition announced that he wanted to be the first to make a donation—of $1,000—to the project. In response to others' astonishment, he said, "The community has made its wishes known, and I am willing to accede to it. My donation is a public act of standing with my community."

What models for decision making does our society practice, and what are their strengths and limitations? What processes can help church leaders as they guide decision-making practices?

I suspect church leaders rarely encounter people willing to show such generosity of spirit when their views do not prevail. Although we pride ourselves on being people of peace, Mennonites have hardly achieved perfect practice when it comes to dealing with contentious decisions.

In what follows, we will consider these questions: What models for decision making does our society practice, and what are their strengths and limitations? What goals do we as churches have for decision making, and what processes can help church leaders as they guide decision-making practices?

Three decision-making models

In the North American literature on group decision making, communication scholars describe three typical approaches.

Minority rule has been defined variously as decision making by experts, by a designated authority, or based on one's position in the hierarchy. Popular in many business organizations, this method is efficient and tends to support or reinforce an existing hierarchical structure. But recent management theory suggests that minor-

ity rule can produce organizations whose members have little ownership in decisions, little loyalty to the group, and little sense of power in the organization.

An episcopal polity centralizes decision making in a denominational hierarchy. The Catholic church provides a prime example of minority rule, with the pope and curia as the classic locus of authority. Despite this long tradition, the Catholic church has demonstrated some desire to increase lay participation in decision making. Sociologist William D'Antonio points to the Papal Birth Control Commission of the 1960s as an example of participatory decision making in the Catholic church; the commission included lay people, theologians, bishops, scientists, and philosophers.[1] Mennonites may sometimes use minority rule when, for example, decisions are made by bishops, conference authorities, pastors, elders, or church councils.

Majority rule, the second stance, is the model on which many political systems are now predicated. Not surprisingly, it is also a popular method for decision making in other forums, including some businesses and churches. One critical element in the success of this method is allowing adequate time for education and discussion prior to a vote. In such cases, majority rule—which may range from a simple majority of as little as 51 percent to a super majority—is most useful when issues are not especially important, the decision must be made quickly, and the commitment of all members to the final decision is not critical.

Especially in the absence of adequate information and conversation, majority rule has drawbacks. In many groups, it makes little room for the perspectives of the minority and provides little protection for their needs and feelings. Groups may move ahead too quickly, cutting off discussion to achieve a speedier solution. Management gurus describe the "Abilene Paradox": the first person to speak up, or the loudest or most persuasive voice, rules the day and sways the vote, often leaving others with unspoken questions and concerns. This situation gives decision-making power to those who are extroverts, particularly articulate, or simply more aggressive in making their point. In all these circumstances, the group suffers under the tyranny of the majority.

On the other hand, when the group has enough time to understand the issues, and enough outlets for authentic discussion and

response, majority rule has its benefits. Research indicates that participation in decision making enhances psychological involvement in and commitment to voluntary organizations and churches. In his analysis of decision making in six Southern Baptist churches, speech communication specialist Charles Conrad maintains that majority rule allows members to integrate religious and secular elements of their identities, and it aids in negotiating tensions within the church's theology and between that theology and the church's organizational structure.[2] In general, encouraging participation in the life and decision making of an organization promotes greater loyalty in its members and greater commitment to its overall goals.

Consensus is a third stance, defined here as a state of agreement in which all legitimate concerns of individuals have been addressed to the satisfaction of the group. The commentary on "Church Order and Unity" in *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* explains that

> *decision making by consensus is a way of coming to unity in the church (see Acts 15:22). Consensus means that the church has together sought for the unity of the Spirit. The church listens carefully to all voices, majority and minority. Consensus is reached when the church has come to one mind on the matter, or when those who dissent have indicated that they do not wish to stand in the way of a group decision. Consensus does not necessarily mean complete unanimity.*[3]

This form of decision making tends to produce better decisions, and like majority rule, it increases members' commitment and satisfaction. It is also likely to be time-consuming, difficult, and tension producing, as members seek to find unanimity or at least reach a decision they all can live with. These inherent difficulties expand exponentially as the group grows from few members to a large congregation or even a denomination. In spite of its drawbacks, consensus does provide outcomes advantageous to the whole group.

When I began studying decision-making processes, I was skeptical of the possibility of achieving consensus. I had rarely

seen it achieved, particularly in a larger group. But after considering the options, I have come to believe that, even when the outcome is not fully realized, the process suggested in the ideal of consensus is worth pursuing. In what follows we will consider four elements critical to this process.

Encouraging discussion

Listening "carefully to all voices, majority and minority" means providing a variety of outlets for education and response. These venues may include Sunday worship, guest lectures, Bible studies, Sunday school classes and small groups, gatherings for prayer, and congregational meetings. Not every parishioner is comfortable speaking in front of a large group. Some will talk more comfortably among those with whom they have deeper relationships of trust. And some will need time to ponder and write out their response. The group may want to establish clear ground rules for discussion (for example: treat others with respect, allow everyone to participate, withhold judgment while listening). The Mennonite Church USA's document on "Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love" provides an excellent set of guidelines to help with this task.[4]

To increase mutual understanding, consider spending a portion of the discussion process in examining the diversity in your body of believers. One way of looking at differences would identify where members are along a traditionalism-communalism continuum. Sociologist Fred Kniss explains that "for Mennonites, traditionalism has meant stressing traditional moral and spiritual values, the importance of family, biblical and communal authority, and denial of individual interests in favor of the collectivity."[5] He describes communalism among Mennonites as "a concern for egalitarianism, social justice, pacifism, environmental conservation, mutual aid, and religious congregations as primary communities for their members." Such differences may indicate divergent political views, varying hermeneutical traditions, and dissimilar understandings of one's relationship to the larger culture.

A congregation had been without pastoral leadership for two years when their search process selected a husband-wife team as candidates. During the congregational meeting leading up to a vote, a vocal minority expressed concern that this couple's cur-

rent church was a "welcoming congregation," one that accepts gays and lesbians into membership. Although the pastors had not initiated the action to become a welcoming congregation, they had presided over the decision-making process in the congregation. This vocal minority would fall within the traditionalist camp. The majority of the congregation proved to be communalists: After a discussion that lasted nearly three hours, a 91 percent vote sealed the decision to invite the couple to become the congregation's pastors. Before the new pastors assumed their responsibilities, several of those in the minority left to find a new church home.

A heterogeneous congregation in which members adhere strongly to opposing views is likely to face almost intractable problems in reaching consensus. One question to consider here is whether congregations are more likely to reach compromise or consensus on structural or fiscal issues (as in the example about the building addition), than on more abstract issues of culture, theology, morality, or ideology.

Even the most straightforward discussion, when carried on over a long period of time, becomes complex.

A second kind of diversity to consider is how members evaluate and prioritize different types of evidence for or against a position. Sociologists John J. Nelson and Harry H. Hiller, in a study of fundamentalist churches, list three argumentation strategies unique to the religious context. They are (1) argument based on scripture, (2) appeal to the deity, and (3) reference to the general mission or role of the church in the world.[6] I would also add a fourth strategy: (4) personal witness or prophecy. To what degree is each of these appeals considered legitimate within segments of the church? On what basis do people believe final decisions should be made? Unless leaders identify these differences in argumentation strategy, conflicts may persist, and opposing sides may not recognize, understand, or accept the basis of others' appeals.

Investing a reasonable amount of time well

The amount of time a group spends on an issue should be determined by the issue's weight, importance, and complexity. Because of the weight of religious-theological debate, discussions on these

matters may be drawn out for years. Unlike businesses, which must move quickly lest they grow stagnant and lose their competitive edge in a fast-paced marketplace, churches may drag out discussion almost endlessly. There should be a happy medium between these models. When an issue is taken up, congregational leaders should establish a schedule that identifies opportunities to participate and the ultimate decision deadline. A schedule is desirable because the average person in the pew is unlikely to sustain enthusiasm for debate longer than three or four months—six at most. And beyond an initial window of persuasion, attitudes are unlikely to change significantly.

I reached this conclusion after observing the Integration Exploration Committee from 1990 to 1995, as its members interacted with other church leaders and members, in the process leading up to the merger of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church in the U.S. and Canada.[7] When those involved had read the materials and asked a few questions, most were either uncertain about what was delaying the merger or they hoped they would die before it took place. I doubt that many minds changed after that initial period.

And even the most straightforward discussion, when carried on over a long period of time, becomes complex. The discussion of the structural merger of the two binational denominations was in process for at least twelve years. During that time, I saw the "garbage can theory of decision making" in action: when organizations make big decisions, a detritus of small issues gets thrown on top, complicating the issue, and making it messy. Unresolved theological issues surrounding women in ministry and membership standards, for example, were tossed into the hopper with the integration deliberations. Some argued that all of these issues should be worked out before a structural merger took place. Had those guiding the process agreed, the merger would have stalled indefinitely.

Determining a desired outcome

Next we consider the result we are seeking. When all are satisfied that their concerns have been heard and attended to, it is time to make a final decision. If leaders determine that consensus is possible and desirable, three vote options—agree, disagree, and

stand aside—should be clearly explained. Because the stand-aside option is rarely practiced, leaders should clarify that those who choose to stand aside are indicating that they do not concur with the decision but will not stand in the way of or try to subvert the group's moving forward with it.

For each decision, or each type of decision, leaders should determine the extent of agreement that will allow the group to move ahead comfortably.

If it seems unlikely that a true consensus will emerge, a majority vote may be in order. Although a politician may serve after being elected by a mere 51 percent of voters, a congregational decision that was opposed by 49 percent of the group is likely to be problematic. For each decision, or each type of decision, leaders should determine the extent of agreement that will allow the group to move ahead comfortably. A new pastor, for example, will surely function more effectively if he or she comes into the congregation with the support of at least 70 or 80 percent of the members.

Shaping empathic responses

Whether our decisions are made by consensus or by majority vote, how do we treat those who continue to disagree or have concerns?

In 1995 in Wichita, Kansas, the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church voted to begin the formal process of merging into a single denomination. After twelve years of processing this decision, which was pursued with particular energy in the three years leading up to the vote, the two bodies, comprising 160,000 members, represented by more than 600 voting delegates, passed the motion by 84 and 86 percent, a higher percentage than many in church leadership had anticipated. Before they announced the results of the vote, leaders cautioned delegates and spectators to the convention, numbering more than 8,000, to remain prayerfully quiet, lest they show disrespect for the feelings of those who had opposed the merger. Because the denomination would not meet in such a sizable body for another two years, the majority supporting the historic change had no opportunity to celebrate, lest their joy be construed as a cry of victory.

At the time I resented being denied a chance to celebrate an accomplishment for which I and many others had invested long hours and significant work. My feelings about this "denial" have changed over the years, as I weigh the value of maintaining community over the momentary joy of "winning." In competitive sports we cheer our side and jeer the losers; in the ongoing life of a community, all members' psychological well-being and sense of belonging are to be prized.

In his study of Southern Baptist decision making, Charles Conrad points out this value:

> *At no time did any member suggest that the outcome of the vote reveals the moral superiority of one position or group of believers over the others. In fact, the act of voting seemed to be only the first step in a ritual which functions to protect the selves of the members of the losing group. Business meetings end in prayer; and business meetings in which voting terminated a politicization cycle ended in prayers which asked for God's guidance in implementing the decision in the event that the congregation had "mis-read" God's will.*[8]

This action, Conrad argues, is critical, because simple "majority votes can readily undermine the sense of identity that the minority has gained through participating in decision-making."[9] He suggests that managing such tension with positive communication may even "compensate for any potential alienation from the 'tyranny of the majority.'"[10] I have come to appreciate this practice in organizations that seek a unity-focused practice over a competitive one.

Final reflections

Even when a group eventually accepts the compromise of a majority vote, the effort to seek consensus closely resembles the process of negotiation, defined as an interactive communication process by which two parties who lack identical interests attempt to coordinate their behavior and allocate scarce resources in a way that will make them better off than they could be if they were to act alone. This negotiation process has been modeled in

Mennonite initiatives such as the Victim-Offender Reconciliation Program (an alternative to the adversarial win-lose model enshrined in our legal system) and taught in the Conflict Transformation Program at Eastern Mennonite University (Harrisonburg, Virginia) and elsewhere. As is true of seeking consensus in congregational or denominational decision making, such negotiation offers the hope that a clear process, which respects the interests and concerns of all parties, stands a greater chance of succeeding. And this process of negotiation is one that, like consensus, honors our Anabaptist history of nonresistance in all human relationships.

Notes

[1] William V. D'Antonio, "Autonomy and Democracy in an Autocratic Organization: The Case of the Roman Catholic Church," *Sociology of Religion* 55, no. 4 (1994): 379–96.

[2] Charles Conrad, "Identity, Structure and Communicative Action in Church Decision Making," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 27, no. 3 (1988): 345–62.

[3] *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995), 63.

[4] "Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love: Commitments in Times of Disagreement" is available in English or Spanish, in various formats, from Mennonite Publishing Network, 616 Walnut Avenue, Scottdale, PA 15683; phone 724-887-8500 or toll free 1-800-245-7894.

[5] Fred Kniss, "Ideas and Symbols as Resources in Intrareligious Conflict: The Case of American Mennonites," *Sociology of Religion* 57, no. 1 (1996): 7–25. See also Kniss's *Disquiet in the Land: Cultural Conflict in American Mennonite Communities* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

[6] John J. Nelson and Harry H. Hiller, "Norms of Verbalization and the Decision Making Process in Religious Organizations," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 20, no. 2 (June 1981): 173–80.

[7] See Kerry Strayer, "Structural Change and Cultural Continuity: The Movement toward Integration in Two Mennonite Denominations" (PhD diss., University of Texas, 1995).

[8] Conrad, "Identity, Structure and Communicative Action," 358.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., 359.

About the author

Kerry Strayer teaches communication at Otterbein College in Westerville, Ohio. Her dissertation focused on the merger between the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church. She began looking more broadly at Mennonite decision-making practices in preparation for a June 2006 conference evaluating the impact on the denomination of the 1995 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. She continues to collect narratives of individual, congregational, and denominational conflict and decision-making processes. To share your story, e-mail her at kstrayer@otterbein.edu.

Interfaith friendship as an act of reconciliation

Susan Kennel Harrison

Not long ago, I met a Buddhist monk at a conference in Montreal on "The World's Religions after 9/11—A Global Call to Peace." He and the other monks stood out because of their gold robes, sandals, and shaved heads. I watched with curiosity as a Catholic woman, apparently motivated by good-natured curiosity, approached him and started a conversation. At one point in their exchange, she reached out to touch his arm. Another woman quickly intervened and told her, "You can't touch him." I mused about what it means to be together as people with faith-based peace commitments but unable to touch each other.

The incident reminded me of another, in 1992, near Amman, Jordan. I was a part of an archaeological excavation project and living on a United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) college campus, for Palestinians. That summer one of the "dig kids" got into a scrap with the son of the campus canteen owner. The parents of the boys got involved and tempers flared; because of language barriers, they did a lot of gesticulating and shouting.

In Jesus' time and ours, the mere activity of risking relationship goes a long way toward building bridges of reconciliation between communities that many forces work to keep apart.

With time, the dispute was resolved. In a gesture of goodwill, the Canadian mother reached out to shake hands with the Palestinian father. But he drew back, raised his hands in the air, and said something in Arabic. Seeing the upset expression on the woman's face, some present tried to explain: "He can't shake your hand; he has to go pray." Later I would learn that Muslims generally do not touch people of the opposite gender unrelated to them.

What does it mean to live in reconciled ways with people of other faiths? It first requires us to be in relationship, but interfaith relationships must be negotiated and cannot be taken for granted.

Biblical strands

The Hebrew Bible includes some material counseling separation from those of other faiths, and some that commends a striking openness to those outside Israel's religio-political group. The New Testament also contains these divergent strands with respect to contact with and treatment of those seen as alien (religiously other). Christians, as heirs to the Judaism of the first and the second temples, have been influenced by an inherited aversion to "what is foreign in religion."[1]

The Gospels portray Jesus as someone with a typical first-century Jewish tendency to keep separate from non-Jews. His message was primarily directed to those within the Jewish household of faith; for the most part his conversation was with Jews of various kinds. His visit with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) and his healing of a Gentile woman's daughter (Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30) are exceptions to the general rule that his interactions were with other Jews.

Yet the Jesus of the New Testament also calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and he illustrates the meaning of that command by telling a story of a Samaritan who shows compassion for a Jewish neighbor. Theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez notes that in Jesus' parable, "The neighbor was the Samaritan who *approached* the wounded man and *made him his neighbor*. The neighbor … is not he whom I find in my path, but rather he in whose path I place myself, he whom I approach and actively seek."[2] The shock value in this story resides in the fact that Jesus' religious community considered Samaritans religious outsiders, people of another faith, yet in this parable it is the outsider who exemplifies righteous behavior.

Jesus is known for instructing his followers to love their enemies. Although the word *enemy* connotes one with whom we have an adversarial relationship, some Hebrew Bible texts label all those outside the Israelite religio-political group as enemies (see Lev. 19:17-18, 33-34). Jesus' commandment to love our enemies could therefore be understood as an injunction to love those who are not of our religious faith.

In Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25, the stranger—foreigner or outsider—is the one in whom the Lord is encountered. Thus, to show kindness to an outsider is to show hospitality to the Son of

Man. The teaching has resonances with the Genesis 18 account in which Abraham and Sarah act hospitably toward three men through whom the Lord is present (epiphany) and promises the couple posterity (salvation). By the time the New Testament is canonized, Christian tradition understands that in showing hospitality to strangers, one may unknowingly entertain angels (Heb. 13:1-3). Given the religious nature of all nations in the ancient Near East, any people not of the Israelites were regarded as religious others. Thus the pluralistic or multireligious setting was the context in which faith in the one God formed and developed. Both the Jesus movement and the Jewish religion that developed into rabbinic Judaism were situated in multireligious contexts.

The Hebrew Bible includes some material counseling separation from those of other faiths, and some that commends a striking openness to those outside. The New Testament also contains these divergent strands.

Another point of continuity with the Hebrew Bible is the Leviticus 19:33-34 commandment not to oppress the alien residing in your land: "You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." According to ethicists William C. Spohn and William R. O'Neill, "no command is repeated more frequently in the Old Testament, with the exception of the imperative to worship the one God."[3]

In the New Testament, Luke-Acts demonstrates this pluralistic context most actively.[4] The Jesus movement understands itself as participating in a new reality in which religious divisions are overcome. Because of what God has done in Jesus Christ, all are children of God through faith: "There is no longer Jew or Greek" (Gal. 3:28). It is God's desire that different religious communities live in right relationship to one another.

How do we live a reconciling faith?

If God in Christ has demonstrated that compassion and mercy are to characterize the faithful, and that righteousness is manifested in reconciliation between peoples, how do we live this faith? What does it mean to embody a faith understood as a discipleship of reconciling peoples to each other and to God? At a minimum, whatever our current location, we will be engaged in meeting and

befriending others as we live together in society. A commitment to justice and the dignity of all its citizens and residents should characterize our multireligious society, and our interpersonal relationships ought to bring glory to our Creator.

Christians, Muslims, and many others wrestle with the question of whether a just and harmonious society can exist without significant agreement on things theological. Mennonite history has seen many schisms arising from differences in religious convictions, but in spite of our fractious past, some Mennonite communities are unified in their worship of God, and they work to maintain fellowship and community despite some diversity in beliefs. Our questions about the truth of other religious traditions need not be resolved before we can begin to relate to people of other faiths and coexist harmoniously. Our starting point is our common humanity; reconciliation in our age is about recovering an ability to see and relate to one another first of all as fellow human beings.

Lessons of experience

Not long ago several Mennonite women embarked on a short camping trip with several Muslim women, most of them from Iran. Our goal was to have fun, enjoy nature, and get to know one another better, as religious women but also as people with pronounced cultural differences.

At the end of our trip, when it was time to pack up, I became aware that those camping around us had been watching us keenly. I assumed that these observers were intrigued by the presence of the Muslim women dressed in their modest traditional garb *(hijab)*. But then I concluded that a source of greater wonderment to our neighbors was this curious mixing of Western and Eastern women, laughing and spending time together. The very fact of our visible, public relationships seemed to mediate something important to these observers.

Wasn't Jesus criticized for just this kind of behavior, for relating publicly to those outside his religious community? He risked becoming impure, as his religious tradition defined it, for the sake of inclusive relationships—and he did so in public in ways that challenged prevailing understandings about what God desired, about God's will for human relationships. This risky relating was

not contingent on theological agreement; Jesus did not insist that those he related to first accept a certain set of beliefs. He initiated relationships and criticized those who challenged his choices. In Jesus' time and ours, the mere activity of risking relationships, in public and in private, goes a long way toward building bridges of reconciliation between communities that many forces are working to keep apart.

I have had the privilege of interacting with two Shiite Muslim families from Iran who are living in Canada as guests of Mennonite Central Committee. Initially my motivation to relate to these Shiite families arose in part from naive notions about the monotheism that both Christians and Muslims profess. More significant, though, was my desire to live out Jesus' teaching to "love your enemies" (Matt. 5:24, Luke 6:27), as I understood it.

When I remember that our own canon includes multiple understandings of God's nature and multiple descriptions of how we are to serve God, I see possibilities for the coexistence of multiple understandings—theirs and mine—of how to seek and honor God.

Early in my work with the MCC exchange program, I still accepted the North American media portrayal of Iran and Islam as enemy. As my relationships with these Iranians developed from acquaintance to friendship, I had to admit that they were not enemies to me as a Mennonite Christian, as a Canadian resident, or as an American citizen. I no longer accepted the mass media descriptions of their country or their religion.

I began to explore other motivations for relationship. For a time I considered a missional goal as a basis for our relationship. I thought my primary motivation needed to be a desire to live among these Muslim families in ways that communicated God's grace and love, as known in Jesus. If I cared authentically about them, I would want them to experience God's love and grace.

But again, as our relationships deepened, I recognized that through their scriptures, prayer life, and respected teachers, they already had a relationship with and commitment to God. They already knew God to be loving, merciful, and forgiving, as I do. Our traditions have given us different narratives that teach similar things about the nature of God. Like me, they believe deeply that the way they live in this world has implications for their relation-

ship with God, as well as for the day of judgment and the afterlife. To be sure, our religious traditions have vastly different views of divine revelation, but we share a desire to live lives that glorify God, and we all struggle to discern what that means for our time.

When I can remember that being Mennonite is not the ultimate good, I feel less anxious about reaching agreement on the details. When I remember that our own scriptural canon includes multiple understandings of God's nature and multiple descriptions of how we are to serve God, my anxiety diminishes and I see possibilities for the coexistence of multiple understandings—theirs and mine—of how to seek and honor God.

Another shift in my motivation for being involved in relationships across religious boundaries came out of a more active affirmation that every human being is God's creation, that God has called each of us good. Our Creator accepts and loves each of us, regardless of creed. To recognize our mutuality before God, and to relate to one another in ways that make it "possible for all to become the persons God created us to be"[5] has facilitated a healthy humility in me and made it easier to risk relationship.

In this way, interfaith relationship becomes a mutual journey undertaken jointly. My imaginative picture is no longer one in which I make my way across a long bridge to see—and judge, or fix—what is lacking on the other side; I no longer feel responsible to bring my Muslim friends back to my side of the bridge. Sometimes the grass seems greener on the other side, and sometimes it is good to taste and see from another's point of view. Sometimes I walk across the bridge and sojourn a while in their land, and sometimes they join me on my territory, but often we just meet somewhere along the way. When we meet in between, we all make a lot of effort, because we have left the places where we are comfortable. We meet there for a time, but we do not try to live on the bridge; we don't cease to be true to ourselves just because we have reached out to one another.

Necessary disciplines

Rabbi David Rosen, a proponent of interreligious dialogue, has proposed that relating across faiths and other similar kinds of difference requires patience and compassion most of all.[6] I agree wholeheartedly, but I would add that one must be prepared to

risk, listen, and befriend. Risking, listening, and befriending become the spiritual practices needed if one is to live among people of other faiths in reconciling ways.

For me, patience means managing anxiety, in me and in those I relate to. To relate to people outside one's faith community often requires that one leave more than one comfort zone. In Canada, where many people of other faiths are new arrivals in North America, to relate to them means crossing differences in language, gender roles, etiquette, politics, education, class, race, child-rearing practices, leisure activities, food and eating schedules—let alone faith![7] Crossing all these divides at once is exhausting—and noteworthy. I believe that the attempt to relate to people of other faiths is itself an act of reconciliation.

We may learn things that challenge our beliefs, and sometimes our anxiety climbs because we become restless in our own tradition. So we have to practice patience with the journey.

We may think that after we've taken the risk to reach out and initiate relationship, the rest will fall into place. In my experience, the high-stakes nature of religious belief keeps us in a constant state of anxiety even as we get to know one another. We may become anxious because we learn things that challenge our beliefs, and sometimes our anxiety climbs because we become restless in our own tradition. So we have to practice patience with the journey; it brings us to terrain that can be exotic and fascinating, but sometimes we only get there by putting one foot in front of the other, patiently moving forward even as we question what we've gotten ourselves into.

We also need patience with ambiguity. If we set out to learn to know someone of another religion but turn back partway because we are impatient that we, or they, aren't getting anywhere, or because we are not comfortable with the journey itself, then we have not crossed what separates us, and the split in God's reign goes unreconciled. The commitment to mutuality has to overrule our desire for results, so we risk, and we seek patience with the ambiguities and uncertainties that are a necessary part of the process. It is the nature of reconciliation that the way matters for the outcome.

Mujerista theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz writes that "the healing of what splits humanity, of what separates one from the

other, is the authentic meaning of reconciliation. If what separates us is not bridged, justice will not be able to triumph and the kindom of God will not become a reality in our midst."[8] She is convinced that the work of reconciliation requires "a mature ethical commitment and work that allows and obliges one to sustain a reconciling attitude and behavior."[9] The most important element in developing and sustaining this kind of attitude is the discipline of compassion. Mutual compassion brings people to want to heal rifts, to live in unity, to find possibilities for life together. It is the basis of Jesus' teaching on love of enemy, and the basis for his commitment to justice for those who are not living the life for which God created them.

Compassion is modeled on the mercy God extends to us. The way I find myself able to develop compassion, especially for a very different other, is by getting to know that other person or group of people. I try to practice curiosity, patience with my anxieties, a dogged determination to keep looking for what will build relationship, and an overarching commitment to the reality that God's love is as deep for them as for me. A compassion rooted in Christian faith can motivate us to keep trying to find ways to be in relationship with people of other faiths. The goal is not just to understand the other, not just to heal the rifts that political and personal circumstances cause to divide us, but to work together at mending the world.

Notes

[1] Geoffrey Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 263.
[2] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 198 (Gutiérrez's italics).
[3] William R. O'Neill and William C. Spohn, "Rights of Passage: The Ethics of Immigration and Refugee Policy," *Theological Studies* 59 (1998): 84–106.
[4] John Koenig, "Hospitality," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 299–301.
[5] Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Reconciliation: An Intrinsic Element of Peace and Justice," in *War or Words? Interreligious Dialogue as an Instrument of Peace*, ed. Donald W. Musser and D. Dixon Sutherland (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 188.
[6] David Rosen, "Are We Changing? An Interfaith Dialogue" (workshop, World Religions after September 11: A Global Congress, Montreal, QC, 13 September 2006).
[7] It is a sad commentary on North American society that the place people most often meet is in the shared world of consumption.

[8] Isasi-Díaz, "Reconciliation," 186–87.
[9] Ibid., 191.

About the author

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Church apologies and the politics of reconciliation

Jeremy M. Bergen

Apology is in the air, and people are taking notice. In 2006, the Canadian Prime Minister apologized and offered compensation to Chinese-Canadians who had had to pay a racist "head-tax" to immigrate to Canada. Some wondered why the government apologized for an injustice against Chinese immigrants but not for unjust policies affecting others groups. The U.S. Senate apologized in 2005 for its failure to enact anti-lynching legislation. Some critics charged that the legislators' "empty rhetoric" was an attempt to court African-American voters. After his reading of a medieval emperor's negative comments about Islam provoked an outcry, Pope Benedict XVI expressed personal regret about how his words had been interpreted. Critics complained that it was a very qualified "non-apology" or noted that the pope had missed an opportunity to repent more generally of the church's long history of violence against Islam.

Only recently has the church's ministry of reconciliation come to include repentance for its past sins and present failures. How does this practice serve to reconcile to the church those who have been oppressed by official church actions?

In 1986, the United Church of Canada apologized to First Nations people for making acceptance of Western civilization a condition of receiving the gospel. Twenty years later, the commemoration of this apology indicated that much reconciling work remains to be done.[1] When the Presbyterian Church (USA) repented in 1987 of anti-Jewish attitudes and rejected supersessionism—the teaching that God's covenant with the Jews has ended—the church committed itself to rethinking Christian theology and practice, a process still in its infancy.[2] Yet, this act has opened new opportunities for dialogue between Christians and Jews. At a "Day of Pardon" service during Lent 2000, Pope John Paul II asked God's forgiveness for sins such so as "those

committed in the service of truth" and those "which have harmed the unity of the Body of Christ."[3] Some observers were quick to point out that the pope did not ask forgiveness for what the church did but only for what individuals in the church did. Others felt that even these limited admissions just gave ammunition to the church's critics.

Mennonite churches have issued a few statements of apology or repentance, and have made some requests for forgiveness. In 1986 the Mennonite Brethren church in Canada asked for and received forgiveness from the Conference of Mennonites in Canada for past practice in which Mennonite Brethren who married members of the other body were sometimes excommunicated.[4] One commentator noted that because it was prominent leaders who made the confession, for specifically named sins, the apology helped shape new relationships.[5] A 1989 joint statement by the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church confessed the church's complicity in patterns of racism and pledged to work for racial justice.[6]

These are just a few examples of a recent increase in corporate apologies—by nations, churches, companies, other institutions—for past wrongs. Corporate apologies share similarities with personal apologies; they take responsibility and express remorse. Yet, the usual purpose of corporate apologies is distinct: reconciliation within communities or among nations. Such apologies are often public and formal, and are made by a representative who may or may not have been directly complicit.

Churches sometimes identify their statements as apologies but more often as statements of repentance or confession or as requests for forgiveness. Joseph Liechty, a professor of peace, justice, and conflict studies, writes that reconciliation entails both repentance, which may include apology, and forgiveness. Christian tradition has usually emphasized the forgiveness aspect.[7] My focus on apology must be considered within this larger framework. The church's mission is to be an agent of God's reconciling love in the world. Recognizing that its own policies and practices have caused suffering and broken relationships, the church has recently begun to repent publicly and apologize.

This article is not a set of instructions for how the church might repent, or what it might repent of. Instead I will compare

some political apologies and some church apologies. What can the church learn about the dynamics of reconciliation from an examination of political apologies? And where do the similarities end? In what way do church apologies point to theological resources for reconciliation that political apologies do not rely on?

Apologies and national or international reconciliation

A political apology lends credence to a particular reading of history. If they are authentic,[8] political apologies will identify what happened and who was responsible, and will declare that the acts in question were wrong. Historical accounts are often disputed, but an apology puts forward a reading of history that recognizes the suffering of those who were harmed. Putting something on record is itself an "amend," which can help restore a relationship, in part because it recognizes the dignity and the experience of those who suffered.[9]

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Acknowledging the truth about a past wrong is powerful. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for example, was premised on the idea that publicly naming apartheid crimes and taking responsibility for them are ingredients of healing. If forgiveness is possible in the public sphere, it will typically require a consensus about what was wrong and who was responsible.[10]

A political apology is made for a specific attitude or specific actions. A government apologizes for a particular policy or act or injustice. Former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney apologized for Canada's internment of Japanese-Canadians during World War II, but we would not expect such an official to confess the general fallenness of government policies. By contrast, Christianity's tradition of general confession, grounded in a theological understanding of human sinfulness, sometimes allows the church to minimize its particular historical failures. After World War II, several German church leaders couched their talk of confession and repentance in this way. They argued that the German church during the Nazi era was guilty as all humanity is guilty of unfaithfulness to God. Only after much debate did German church

groups begin to issue statements that named the church's specific complicity in the rise of Nazism, the war, and the Holocaust.[11] A national government will not confess abstract or universal shortcomings, but it may name particular wrongs. If church apologies are to help heal the memories of particular wrongs, those wrongs need to be specifically named.

Political apologies give rise to questions about what actions are needed in order to restore a relationship. Apologies may come near the end of a reconciliation process or near the beginning, but they are rarely all that is required. Any group making an apology must consider how it will ensure that the wrong will not be repeated, perhaps through teaching about the past, monuments and commemorations, or a change in policies. And it must contemplate making reparations to victims. Similarly, as the church discerns the need to apologize for past and present racism, for example, it must commit itself to identifying and working against persistent systemic patterns of discrimination. Engaging the past penitentially always entails commitment to ongoing reform.

Many problems surround both political and church apologies. How does a group decide what to apologize for, especially if apologizing for anything and everything dilutes the power of such acts? What is the relationship between individual and collective guilt? Does an apology adequately distinguish degrees of complicity within a group? Is a recent immigrant to Canada somehow responsible for how the government treated the Chinese in the 1930s? Who is authorized to speak for Canadians living then, and to apologize for their actions? How can we judge the past in light of the present, especially if society's worldview has changed? Sometimes legal agenda intrudes on a decision to apologize. An apology's possible effect on lawsuits was an issue that arose as mainline Canadian churches made statements about their involvement in Aboriginal residential schools.

To repent of past failures is also to recognize that the present sins of the church have historical roots, which must be named if they are to be forgiven and in order to move forward.

The very fact that nations and churches are presently engaged in acts of corporate apology ought to remind the church of something it already knows: the church is a historical actor.

Although the mission of the church is from God, this mission is entrusted to fallible human beings. The church in history has not attained perfection; we are pilgrims on the way. The church is called to relate to the world around it as a humble companion on the journey and not as an aloof, infallible judge.

Church apologies and the nature of the church

Though nations and churches are corporate bodies with their own histories, the church has an origin and a mission that transcend its human aspect. At some point, the analogy between political apologies and church apologies breaks down. I will highlight several dynamics that illustrate the ways church apologies may be aspects of the distinctly Christian ministry of reconciliation. The church is called to engage penitentially with its past and to reconcile with hurting people, and it is uniquely enabled to do so.

The church is a communion of saints. Christians are baptized into a community that extends through time and space and transcends physical death. We are bound to Christians who have died, and to those not yet living, because we are all members of the one body of Christ. We can say "we" of the church through generations in a way that we cannot say the same of our nation. As we are inspired and instructed by the cloud of witnesses whose faithfulness continues to speak to us (see Heb. 11:4), so we are linked to the sins of those who came before us in the faith. Thus, the church has a particular calling to examine its past and to ask forgiveness for what it has done wrong, because the church through time is one body, under a single head.

A vision of the church as a communion of saints enables the church to relate to its history in a way that frees the past to be instructive for the future. Apologies for past actions are for the sake of the present and the future. To repent of how European churches treated First Nations peoples is to declare a direction for the present, one that entails a commitment to mend these relationships in the future. To repent of past failures is also to recognize that the present sins of the church have historical roots, which must be named if they are to be forgiven and in order to move forward.

By facing past wrongs with a view to reconciliation, collective apologies can create conditions for a healing of memories. As

memories of past injustices can perpetuate cycles of resentment and revenge, so a healed memory incorporates the desire for forgiveness and reconciliation expressed by an apology. When the leaders of the Catholic church in Northern Ireland and the Church of England asked mutual forgiveness for the evils the English and Irish had committed against one another, they were seeking to reframe this history in a way that prevents rather than fuels further resentment. The international Mennonite-Catholic dialogue sought to heal memories by acknowledging mutual culpability for division and prejudice. The dialogue also sought to understand Mennonite-Catholic history accurately and without negative stereotypes, and to emphasize the faith these groups hold in common.[12]

Holiness is one of the traditional marks of the church, along with unity, catholicity, and apostolicity. Sometimes the church's holiness is taken to mean that the church itself cannot sin, though members of the church are indeed sinners. In the Bible, *holiness* refers primarily to being set apart, as were the Levitical priests, for example. As the church discerns a call to repent of wrongs it has done, we may understand holiness not as moral purity but in terms of how Christ's forgiveness sets the church apart for mission. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann suggests that the church is sanctified—made holy—as its sins are forgiven in Christ: "The church is therefore holy precisely at the point where it acknowledges its sins and the sins of [humankind] and trusts to justification through God."[13] The church's confession of sin is a sign of sanctification, of strength in weakness that impels the church toward solidarity with the weak and service in the world.

Finally, church apologies are occasions through which the church remembers that we are a forgiven people. Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams reminds us that the church was constituted as a community forgiven of a very particular sin, the disciples' rejection and abandonment of Jesus.[14] Jesus is the victim of our actions, but he is therefore also the basis of our hope. Williams also counsels penitence rather than self-criticism alone. The latter may place analysis of the past in a strictly human framework and can lead to a tyranny of our present understanding. If we assume that we know better than our unenlightened forebears—that we would never defend something as obviously

sinful as slavery, for example—then we are missing the point of ecclesial repentance. In penitence, we do not rely on our own understanding but look to God's mercy because of the ways we continue to make Christ our victim. God's forgiveness is not a vague sentiment. It is particular: for us, and for our sins. Indeed, we ought to use social analysis to understand the particularity of our sins, though such analysis should not be the starting point. The church is reminded that we must listen to the voice of our own victims, and seek to give voice to victims, not because we possess a superior social analysis, but because the church's own Victim is the basis for the world's hope. That is, the church must always seek to live into its forgiven-ness in ways that are patient and humble.

If we assume that we know better than our unenlightened forebears—that we would never defend something as obviously sinful as slavery, for example—then we are missing the point of ecclesial repentance.

Conclusion

The church is always called to the ministry of reconciliation, one aspect of which is the reconciliation of social relationships. Yet only in recent decades has this ministry come to include repentance for the church's past sins and present failures. We need to explore quite particularly how the practice of corporate repentance serves to reconcile to the church those groups within it, such as women or people of colour, who have been oppressed by official church actions. An effective practice of ecclesial repentance will also address harm done to those who are now outside the church. At the same time, we must consider what the limits of the practice of repentance are.

Whether and for what the churches ought to repent will require ongoing discernment in denominations, conferences, and congregations, as well as the commitment to move from official statements to the conversion—turning around—of people and structures. In any case, we should not start with an abstract belief about repentance or apology and then cast around for things to repent of. Rather, the issues must arise from the context of ministry as we uncover pain, suffering, and silence caused by our actions. And we must listen to those prophets among us. Having ears to hear the truth in words of judgment requires a prayerful openness to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Notes

[1] For the 1986 statement, see http://www.united-church.ca/policies/1986/a651.shtm.
[2] An example of such rethinking is R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996). For the Presbyterian statement, see www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/issues/christiansjews.pdf.
[3] The text of this service and supporting documents may be found at www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/jubilevents/events_day_pardon_en.htm.
[4] *Conference of Mennonites in Canada Yearbook, 1986* (Winnipeg: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1986), 81. See also Conrad Stoesz, "Undoing a Long-standing Practice," *Mennonite Brethren Herald,* 26 April 2005; http://www.mbherald.com/44/06/undoing.en.html.
[5] William Klassen, "Seeing Jesus in an MB Penitent," *Mennonite Reporter*, 28 July 1986, 5.
[6] See www.mennonitechurch.ca/about/foundation/documents/1989-racism.htm. Denominational statements on racism are discussed in Malinda E. Berry, "On Racism, Mennonite Politics, and Liberation (Words We Don't Like to Hear)," *Vision* 3 (Fall 2002): 20–28.
[7] Joseph Liechty, "Putting Forgiveness in Its Place: The Dynamics of Reconciliation," in *Explorations in Reconciliation: New Directions for Theology*, ed. David Tombs and Joseph Liechty (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006), 60.
[8] Some political apologies are undoubtedly insincere. That is, they may not be motivated by genuine remorse or desire for reconciliation, or reflect a true change in attitude. For example, Girma Negash discusses the political calculus of recent Japanese apologies and the evasiveness of President Bill Clinton's apology for failure to prevent the Rwandan genocide, in *Apologia Politica: States and Their Apologies by Proxy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006).
[9] Trudy Govier and Wilhelm Verwoerd, "The Promise and Pitfalls of Apology," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33 (2002): 67–82.
[10] An excellent recent discussion about forgiveness in politics and the reconciling potential of political apologies is Mark R. Amstutz, *The Healing of Nations: The Promise and Limits of Political Forgiveness* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005). See also Donald W. Shriver Jr., *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
[11] Matthew D. Hockenos, *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).
[12] "Called Together to Be Peacemakers: Report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference, 1998–2003"; www.bridgefolk.net/dialogue2003/calledtogether.htm.
[13] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 353.
[14] Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, rev. ed. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002).

About the author

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Book review

Mary Lehman Yoder

Preparing Sunday Dinner: A Collaborative Approach to Worship and Preaching, by June Alliman Yoder, Marlene Kropf, and Rebecca Slough. Scottdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2005.

When I first heard that June Alliman Yoder, Marlene Kropf, and Rebecca Slough were working on a book about worship, I was delighted. When I heard its proposed title, I chuckled right out loud. What a great metaphor! I began thinking of this book as a cookbook, analogous to the MCC cookbooks, each of which has made a marvelous contribution in its own way.[1]

Preparing Sunday Dinner is a kind of cookbook, but it is not what I expected. Let me hasten to say that it exceeded my expectations. In some ways, it is better compared to Julia Child than to Betty Crocker. I say that as one who uses both resources: I go to Betty Crocker when I want quick information and time-tested basic practices. I go to Julia Child when I want to understand the preparation of a particular dish—its history, the best ingredients to use, why they are needed and where to find them, the kitchen utensils required, the detailed steps for preparation, ideas for presentation, and suggestions about what might accompany the dish.

Preparing Sunday Dinner is better compared to Julia Child than to Betty Crocker.

Working my way through *Preparing Sunday Dinner* with a colored pencil and sticky tabs, I noted one passage after another that address theoretical and practical issues I regularly face. The early chapters called me back to the biblical framework that grounds Christian worship, and to the need to consider carefully the rich variety of folks present in the congregation where I pastor. One size does not fit all, yet the writers emphasize the basics that must be part of worship in every congregation. For example, the central place of *story* (the biblical story, congrega-

tional stories, personal stories) receives attention in several chapters.

I read the chapters on "Enriching the Fare" and "Making Occasions Special" as I was deep in planning for Lent. In my congregation this season means a richer diet of ritual and more frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper. These two chapters were enormously helpful. The charts and gray text boxes present vast amounts of information in an accessible format even for the reader who chooses not to digest the well-written prose. The chart "Ways of knowing in worship and preaching" (p. 265) is a gem.

As I color-coded more paragraphs and attached more sticky tabs, I discovered the index. What a gift! The index in a beloved cookbook from my home congregation is almost useless, unless you know that you should look for apple dumplings under "M" for Mother's Apple Dumplings, or for apricot bars under "L" for Luscious Apricot Bars. In contrast, the *Preparing Sunday Dinner* index has logical and useful headings. In it I have highlighted topics and page numbers that I know I will return to again and again.

Preparing Sunday Dinner is not a quick and easy Betty Crocker or a *Fix-It and Forget-It* type of cookbook. It is not a fast read, nor will a glance at the table of contents help you decide which page to turn to if you want to know how to write a prayer of corporate lament. In fact, the table of contents is in some ways the least helpful part of the book, because the chapter titles so cleverly continue the Sunday dinner metaphor. Nevertheless, the book's well-written prose, clear charts, useful appendixes, and index contribute to making it an invaluable resource for preachers and worship leaders who care about the work they do together in preparing Sunday dinner. Kudos to three great cooks!

Note

[1] Mennonite Central Committee's World Community Cookbook Series includes *More-with-Less Cookbook* (1976), *Extending the Table* (1991), and *Simply in Season* (2005), all published by Herald Press.

About the reviewer

Mary Lehman Yoder is in her thirteenth year of collaboration with the pastoral team at Assembly Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana, where she has primary responsibility for worship and pastoral care. She cooks and gardens with similar passion.

Book review

Susan Kennel Harrison

Meeting Our Multifaith Neighbors, by Brice H. Balmer. Waterloo, ON, and Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2006.

Brice Balmer's *Meeting Our Multifaith Neighbors* tries to make space in North American Christian circles for more reflection on the many ways we are encountering people of other religious traditions. He asks, "How do we as Christians interact with and engage neighbors of other faiths?" "Do we know what skills, attitudes, and disciplines are appropriate for meeting our new neighbors?" (9). He rightly notes that fears and misunderstandings can keep us from reaching out to people of other faiths. He reassures us that despite our stereotypes and anxieties, taking risks can be rewarding and transforming on many levels.

Balmer uses his and others' experiences to illustrate the psychological, spiritual, and material challenges posed to our identity by our encounter with people of other religious traditions. He writes about his experience with Interfaith Grand River to show how a religiously diverse group with goals for the common good of a community can work together over a period of time, thus providing bridges between peoples when circumstances threaten to erode goodwill. His account demonstrates the importance of creating a context that can sustain interfaith conversation, so we are able to collaborate and develop deeper understanding of one another.

Balmer does not try to spell out theological criteria for how Christ relates to other faiths, but he provides windows that allow us to observe what it might look like to live into that question. His contribution is valuable, because he shows that we can move forward in love and hospitality without having first answered all of our theological questions about the faith of others.

Through stories and commentary, Balmer consistently calls for curiosity, acceptance, and hospitality as foundational attitudes for reaching out and building relationships with others. His writing moves back and forth between biblical exegesis, personal experience, and pastoral mentoring.

The book's organization may lead one to conclude that his call to accept and relate to non-Christians as they are is oriented toward being politically correct, but it is instead grounded in his understanding of Jesus' commandment to love God and our neighbours as ourselves (134). The mandate to relate to people of other faiths is an imperative for him that is biblically based and reinforced by his personal experiences. Balmer provides a variety of biblical examples of hospitality, and he understands this virtue as a vital part of Christian spiritual practice (43–52). His attention to what it means to be a person of social power in North America also informs his convictions about the imperative of building relationships of trust, if we are to have integrity as hosts (133).

Balmer's book is a timely resource for North American Christians who are seeking models for building community with their neighbours of other faiths.

Balmer writes pastorally to Christian leaders, and he gives guidance on how we can create a safe place in which to be hospitable to others (46–49). He acknowledges that it is impossible to open oneself to new relationships without taking the risk of being transformed spiritually, and he offers reflections about that kind of spiritual transformation (25–40).

This book is valuable for individual reading but designed for group study; Balmer recognizes that we need Christian companions when we start relating to our multifaith neighbours. The organization of the book leaves something to be desired, but it is a timely resource for North American Christians who are seeking models for building community with their neighbours of other faiths.

About the reviewer

Susan Kennel Harrison is a graduate student at Toronto School of Theology, and she serves as a coordinator for the Mennonite Central Committee exchanges of students between Iran and Toronto.

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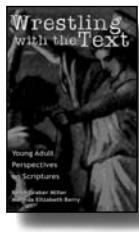

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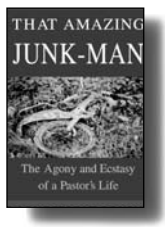

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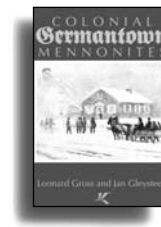

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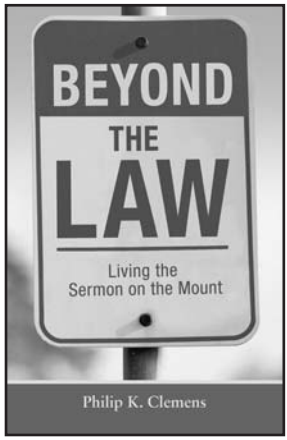

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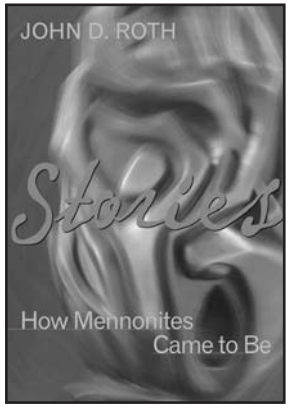

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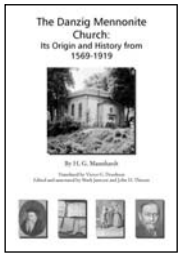

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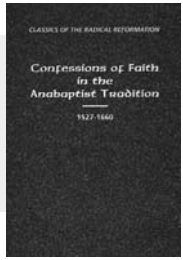

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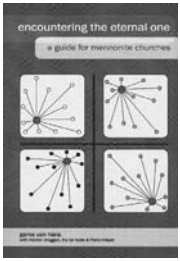

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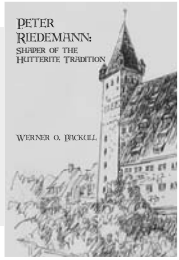

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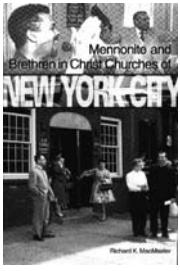

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