



**Mennonite
World Conference**

A Community of Anabaptist
related Churches

**Congreso
Mundial Menonita**

Una Comunidad de
Iglesias Anabautistas

**Conférence
Mennonite Mondiale**

Une Communauté
d'Eglises Anabaptistes

Teaching Resource

Identity and Ecumenicity¹

A Theology of Interchurch Hospitality and Denominational Identity

Mennonite World Conference embarked on the first formal dialogue process with the Baptist World Alliance in 1989. Since then, MWC has entered into conversations with Lutheran World Federation, Seventh Day Adventists, Catholics, and, most recently, a five-year trilateral dialogue with Lutherans and Catholics. Seeing the value of these dialogues, the Faith and Life Commission developed this document to give MWC national churches and local congregations a better understanding of the theological basis for ecumenical hospitality and why we think such conversations are consistent with Anabaptist values. The document was approved as an MWC teaching resource by the General Council in Limuru, Kenya, April 2018.

Introduction

When we speak of the global church of Christ in the context of Mennonite World Conference the apostle Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth offers a helpful point of reference. In chapter 13, which focuses on the theme of love, Paul recognizes that all human knowledge—even Christian, theological and denominational knowledge—is limited. As we do theology we know only “in part” (1 Cor. 13:9), seeing the truth as a “reflection in a mirror” (1 Cor. 13:12).² Our knowledge, as well as our capacity to understand, is always influenced by our perspective. In the eternal presence of God things will be different (1 Cor. 13:12). But for now this is all we have. In our journey as human beings—limited by time, space, and our five senses—our knowledge is always partial and our understanding of the Truth is shaped by our context and personal perspectives.

This is why we should be considerate, patient, empathetic, and, above all, loving with each other. “Where there is knowledge,” writes Paul, “it will pass... For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror darkly... Now I know in part. Then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:8, 13). So whenever Christians from different theological traditions meet and dialogue with each other, we should do so in the spirit of the three great Christian virtues that will endure.

Paul also notes that as Christians we speak different languages—both literally and in the sense of our various theological identities, historical developments and contextual realities. “Undoubtedly,” writes Paul, “there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker is a foreigner to me...” (1 Cor. 14:10-11).

These are genuine limitations. But recognizing this can also become a freeing experience—I am free to reaffirm my identity and my point of view, since “that is the only one I have.” But I'm also free

¹ “Ecumenicity” is understood here as a tendency and willingness toward *dialog* and *cooperation* with other Cristian Denominations or Church Traditions. The word “Ecumenicity” comes from the greek-biblical root *oikos* (house) and *menein* (living), which is equivalent to “the whole christian family that dwells in the House of God.”

² Literally “as an enigma” – Greek *ainigmati*.

to recognize the possibility that others have their own understandings, their own point of view, their own historical and contextual limitations. And it is also freeing to know that all of this can happen in the spirit and the power of “faith, hope, and love.”

1. We Need Confessional-Denominational Identity

One can lament the split of the Christian church into so many denominations and traditions. But this reality after 2000 years of Christianity is not necessarily a bad thing, as long as we remember the Lord’s Prayer for Christian unity in John 17. Indeed, denominational identities may be useful or even necessary:

1.1. No single church or denomination is able to grasp the whole richness of God; diversity is essential in order to build unity. For the body to function well, the eye must be an eye; the ear must be an ear; the hand must be a hand (1 Cor. 12:15-20). If these differences are abolished, the body cannot survive.

1.2. Throughout history, denominations have helped apply the Gospel to specific situations. For example, in a time when the church was wealthy and embroiled in worldly politics, the Franciscans wanted to live the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in a radical way. In a time when some Christians were paying for the forgiveness of sins, Luther rediscovered the Gospel of free grace. The Anabaptists dared to insist on the biblical practice of voluntary baptism and non-violence, breaking with the status quo endorsed by the Catholic and Protestant state churches even at the cost of harsh persecution and exile. The Methodists arose in a time of needed revival; and the Pentecostals emerged in a context of racial discrimination and institutional rigidity.

1.3. Denominations provide correctives: At its beginning, every denomination emerged as a corrective to spiritual or ethical problems within the church. That is why denominations must remain flexible. What was true and needed in one moment could become wrong and useless in a different historical or cultural setting. This happened to the people of Israel with the iron serpent: once a symbol of salvation, it later became an object of idolatry. That is why denominations must be open to renewal—to correct what is wrong and address possible biblical deficits—if they want to stay true to the spirit of their founding mothers and fathers.

1.4. Each denomination carries specific gifts and graces that must be shared for the benefit of all. The interdenominational Christian “banquet” is a true and wonderful gift to the global church because we can learn so much from each other: the erudition of the Jesuits, for example, or the simple life style of the Franciscans; the Christ-centered mysticism of Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross, and Gerhard Tersteegen; the zeal for missions, Christian education, and spirituality of the Pietists; the biblicism, non-violence, believer’s church convictions of the Anabaptists; *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *sola scriptura* of the Lutherans; God’s sovereignty and glory in the Calvinist tradition; the Christian “method” of the Methodists; the personal evangelism of the Baptists; the community discernment of the Quakers; simple living of the Amish; the transcendental dimension of divine power of the Pentecostals; the “upside-down” kingdom of Latin American “base communities,” etc.

Therefore, it is not uniformity but diversity that contributes to the building up of the one body of Christ (Eph. 4:1-16).

2. We Need Christ-centered Ecumenicity

Churches and denominations should not remain alone or isolated from each other. They need interchurch hospitality and dialogue.

2.1. Churches should celebrate the one body of Christ. Ephesians 4:4-6 reminds us that there is just one Spirit, one Hope, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, and one divine Father. When Christ returns, people from “every nation, tribe, people and language” will join as one community of praise to welcome him (Rev. 7:9). Other passages in scripture affirm that there is just one “bride of the Lamb” (Rev. 19:7); one “people of God” (1 Peter 2:9-10); one “family of faith” (Gal. 6:10); one “body of Christ” (Rom. 12:5); one “kingdom

of heaven” (Matt. 16:19). Beyond the history of denominations the church is an existential unity united through its redemption in the triune God.

2.2. This means that as children of God we are all “siblings.” Ephesians 3:14-15 informs us that our common kinship with God makes us family and relatives. The saying “You can choose your friends, but you cannot choose your family” is valid for interchurch relations: Whoever belongs to Christ is my brother or my sister. From an eternal point of view there are no “first cousins” nor “second cousins” nor “distant relatives” in the “household of God.”

2.3. Distinct churches and traditions can potentially complement each other. Romans 12:4-5 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-20 insist that members of the one body are different, but that their diversity enables the body to function as it should. To be sure, not all members are equal in nature and function: one head coordinates a divine work. Yet if the body is going to function well, differences among members are essential. No one can dismiss another member of the body of Christ as if he could do without him. No one has all the gifts needed. The body is more than ear, mouth or eye. This is true both for the local congregation as well as for the shared pilgrimage of different Christian traditions.

2.4. Churches are called to help each other and to build each other up. Weak members need the strong ones; and there are times when the weakness or vulnerability of one member of the body reveals the character of Christ. As Paul writes, “those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor” (1 Cor. 12:22-23).

Conclusion

In the household of God (*ecumene*) we need to be ready to live in “reconciled diversity,” being both *brave* in claiming our denominational heritage, legacy and contribution, and *humble* in acknowledging our limited understanding.

Whatever truth God has placed into the different denominations and their history needs to be heard, preserved, and articulated. Minorities should not be overpowered by majorities.

But even as we recognize healthy diversity there is also a need for humility. Not everything in our specific denominational histories is good, biblical and pleasing to God. Many splits could have been avoided. Many memories need to be healed. Many condemnations stand in need of repentance and reconciliation. Sins and errors from the past must be confessed and forgiven.

After all, the church has received the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-19). And if our witness is going to be credible to the watching world, reconciling work must begin in the “household of God” (Eph. 2:19).

This commitment to a ministry of reconciliation will undoubtedly take many forms. In some instances, it may imply full, formal unity in all aspects of church life and practice; with other groups it may only be a functional unity, in which we agree to collaborate on a limited number of initiatives. But in every instance our ecclesial orientation will be in the direction of reconciliation rather than an identity that is anchored primarily in our differences.

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