



**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

From the Faith and Life Commission

What does it mean for member churches of Mennonite World Conference to share an Anabaptist identity? What is the value of Anabaptist “tradition” – and what does that word mean in a global context? What are our Anabaptist understandings of mission and fellowship? In 2009, the newly appointed Faith and Life Commission was asked to produce three papers that could be used in helping MWC communities reflect on such questions: “A Holistic Understanding of Fellowship, Worship, Service, and Witness from an Anabaptist Perspective” by Alfred Neufeld Friesen of Paraguay; “The ‘Anabaptist Tradition’ – Reclaiming its Gifts, Heeding its Weaknesses” by Hanspeter Jecker of Switzerland; and “Koinonia – The Gift We Hold Together” by Tom Yoder Neufeld of Canada. All three papers were approved as a teaching resource by the MWC General Council in May 2012.

A heart with four chambers: A theological foundation for the work of MWC’s four commissions (Peace, Mission, Faith and Life, and Deacons)

By Alfred Neufeld Friesen

The “Anabaptist tradition” is a historical movement, rooted in the sixteenth century Radical Reformation, of contextualizing the Bible’s apostolic and prophetic legacy as lived out by the early church. Tradition is a historic witness of moments of renewal and contextualization, a dynamic in need of permanent perpetuation.

The Radical Reformation – triggered by the Protestant Reformation but with roots in the historic medieval church – aimed to restore the church to a believer’s community, an ethic of love, and a Christian existence based on discipleship to Jesus. It understood the church (the Body of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit) as the visible expression of God’s character, plan and presence in creation – God’s kingdom breaking into human history and moving toward a new creation.

On fellowship (*koinonia*)

God’s saving intervention in the world is summarized by the word *reconciliation*. “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility . . . creating in himself one new humanity . . . thus making peace, and in his one body to reconcile both to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility” (Ephesians 2:14-16). The peace of God, the reconciling work of Christ and the new birth through the Spirit make possible Christian fellowship in the church. It is a peace that transcends the borders of the church and permeates the world.

The peace work and the peace witness of the church are based on the fatherhood of God, who

by his gracious act made us equal in creation and adopted us, by redemption, into his family. The work and witness of peacemaking is also based on the way of Christ, the son, who loved and blessed his enemies, inspired restorative justice (Luke 19:8-10), made us ambassadors of reconciliation and gave us the ministry to reconcile (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). The comfort and freedom of the Holy Spirit makes possible the repentance of sin (2 Corinthians 3:17; John 16:8); the “new birth from above” (John 3:5); and the empowerment to be Jesus’ ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20) – thus fulfilling God’s intent “to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace” (Luke 1:79). Human institutions of social class, religion, nationality, economics and culture shall not produce “dividing walls of hostility”; rather, the cross of Christ must “put to death their hostility” (Ephesians 2:14).

On worship (*leitourgia*)

Worship is the appropriate response of creation in honouring the Creator and Redeemer until time gives way to eternity.

The church expresses worship in words and deeds:

- a. Words are used to praise God for his wisdom in creation, his holiness in character, his righteous judgment, and his loving mercy in sustaining and redeeming the works of his hand. Worship is expressed by narrating the story of God’s saving work with humankind and with his chosen people. The church worships God by articulating, confessing and explaining to every generation who God is and what God is doing in the world. Worship defines the condition and calling of humanity. The church worships in confession, prayer and song, and – in the discernment of the Spirit – teaches the written legacy of the prophets and apostles.
- b. Deeds are as important as words in the praise and the worship of God (Romans 12:1-2; Isaiah 58). The life of the church as the body of Christ itself is worship: “In the same way let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Practice and reflection are both liturgical activities and theological work, commanded to the people of God (Psalm 1:2-3).

On service (*diakonia*)

Christ, our master, is our model for servant leadership. By always attending the sick and needy, by washing the feet of his companions (John 13:14), by giving his life for his friends (John 15:13) as well as for his enemies, he taught and practiced authentic greatness found in service (Matthew 20:26; 23:11). The apostles urged the church to appoint deacons “full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3) so that together, the church could cover the tasks of prayer, proclamation, and service (Acts 6:4).

Christian service fulfills the great commandment of love (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 19:19; 1 Corinthians 13), and strives to bring justice, mercy and humility to a broken world (Micah 6:8). Jesus praised the merciful Samaritan, who shared his time and his goods with a victim of violence and injustice. Christian service is always anchored in the Lordship of Christ, who as returning King in the Last Judgment tells us that we serve him by serving the most needy (Matthew 25:31-40).

On witness (*martyria*)

The church is God’s prophet and proclaimer in the world, giving visibility to God’s will and nature. As chosen people and as the Body of Christ “before the watching world” each disciple, every congregation and the global church are called to bear witness to God’s salvation and his kingdom.

Being the missional and apostolic church of Christ – partaking in God’s mission and in the penetration of God’s kingdom into the darkness of an unredeemed world – means a

willingness to sacrifice and to suffer as Christ did. The mission of the pilgrim church implies a readiness to move; throughout history, the covenant people of God have often fled from persecution or been sent as missionaries. They have witnessed from the perspective of exile and marginalization. They have followed the pattern of the dispersed early Jerusalem church: in the great commission, Christ sent out his apostles in the power of the Spirit to disciple all nations (Matthew 28:19-20). Stephen – followed by countless witnesses after him – have borne witness unto death while seeing “heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56). The church is thus called to mission, martyrdom, the triumph of the resurrection, and the glory of the new creation.

Conclusion

Mennonite World Conference has organized four standing Commissions to give “heart” to the vision of being “linked to one another in a worldwide community of faith for fellowship, worship, service, and witness.” All four activities are as crucial to life and witness of each of the four chambers of the human heart.

When Christ returns, when all human beings are resurrected, when the first heaven and earth are gone and new creation prevails in a New Jerusalem – our worldwide community of Anabaptist related churches wishes to hear the voice of the Lord: “Well done, good and faithful servant... Come and share your master’s happiness” (Matthew 25:21).

Alfred Neufeld Friesen of Asuncion, Paraguay, is chair of the MWC Faith and Life Commission and an elder in Vereinigung der Mennoniten Brüder Gemeinden Paraguays, the national Mennonite Brethren church. He is president of Universidad Evangélica del Paraguay (Protestant University) and chairs the national association of Protestant churches.