



**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.

Koinonia – The Gift We Hold Together

Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld

The word *koinonia* has rightly become a central term and concept for Mennonite World Conference. In addresses, publications and programmatic efforts, leaders have been nudging the global Anabaptist community to a deeper relationship with each other. Even when we don't use the word *koinonia* itself, much of the terminology we use depends on it: meeting needs, mutual encouragement, gift giving and receiving, fellowship, interdependence, solidarity, consensus, communion, community, unity, being “together.”

As used in the Greek New Testament, *koinonia* and its immediate family of terms do not lend themselves to precise definition. Sometimes their meanings are very ordinary, other times profound to the point of mystery. Together, however, these meanings take on force and depth in shaping our calling to be a community of faith.

The range of meanings extends from *koinos* (ordinary, profane; Acts 10, 11) to *koinonia* as “sharing” and “partnership,” whether in labour or money (Philippians, 2 Corinthians 8, 9, Romans 15), and to “solidarity” with each other in times of need (Romans 12:13). Going far beyond our ability to comprehend, we are invited to participate in the *koinonia* of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (John 17; Philippians 2). The most material and the most spiritual dimensions are celebrated in “communion,” the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 10, 11).*

Koinonia is the biblical name we give to the loftiest and the same time the most ordinary and practical of concepts. It is found in the nature of the *koinonia* God gives us, in the incarnation of the Son, and in the blowing of God's Spirit. Yet the most profound dimensions of *koinonia* are to be found in the utterly ordinary exercise of it in our communion with God and in the body of Christ. *Koinonia* is an identity-giving, life-shaping, commitment-forging, and action-provoking gift of God. We receive it with Christ standing among us and his Spirit enabling us

to both receive and exercise this gift.

***Koinonia* in MWC: both reality and goal**

In a 2010 article entitled “Diversity: Blessing, curse, or call to communion?” Larry Miller correctly identified it as the reality undergirding our life together, but also as a goal toward which we are moving. While the specific terminology of *koinonia* is not employed by Pakisa Tshimika and Tim Lind in their *Sharing Gifts in the Global Family of Faith*, it is clear that “global gift sharing” perfectly captures many of the dimensions of *koinonia*, not least in locating its ground and origin in God’s own gift sharing. Similarly the seven “Shared Convictions” and Alfred Neufeld Friesen’s commentary on them, resonate well with what we have discovered about *koinonia* in the New Testament.

At the same time, the International Planning Commission of the MWC identified “autonomy” as one of the given realities of the MWC community of churches. It is in fact one of the criteria for membership in the MWC. As I see it, *koinonia* and autonomy are in considerable tension. “Autonomy” implies independence rather than interdependence. That is likely not the intention behind the use of the term in MWC. But in MWC history, the insistence on autonomy has sometimes reflected the desire not to have the search for unity compromise our own efforts at faithfulness.

Larry Miller called for “autonomy-in-communion,” clearly wishing nevertheless to move “beyond autonomy into communion-in-diversity.” Might our study of *koinonia* nudge us to speak less of autonomy, independence and self-determination, and more of granting each other the space to be as diversely and distinctly and uniquely faithful as possible? This is a *koinonia* space where the walls are thin, the windows and doors are open, the conversations are overheard, maybe even interrupted, where we grant each other profound respect without distancing ourselves beyond the reach of counsel and exhortation.

In Romans 14:1–15:13 Paul addresses a vexing set of issues in the circle of house churches in Rome, made up of observant Jews and not so observant Gentiles. Should one eat meat? Should one observe special days? These issues were at least as troubling to early believers as any doctrinal or ethical issues we face. What made the issues so difficult is that they were competing visions and practices of holiness and worship. How do you compromise on faithfulness?

Interestingly, Paul never settles the question of who is strong and who is weak, whether meat should be eaten or special days observed. He does insist that nothing is *koinon* (unclean, profane) of itself (14:14). But even that hardly settles

the question. Paul recognizes that these issues are a test of the *koinonia* of believers with God and each other. He insists that Roman believers not violate each other’s efforts at faithfulness. They must find a way, precisely as those whom God has welcomed, who together share one Lord (14:1-6; 15:7)—to grant each other such space and freedom.

Diversity: the noisy place of new creation

Such mutual respect and freedom shows the strength of *koinonia*. Those granting each other such space remain firmly tethered to each other in the “chains of peace” (Ephesians 4:3; cf. Romans 14:17-19), not because of their resolve, but because of God’s. We might think that true *koinonia* might lessen differences that can bring conflict. Instead, it opens even more space for differences. Indeed, it is driven by a “desire for difference” as a gift from God to the community of faith.

Since the *koinonia* of the gospel invites and embraces strangers (Romans 12:13) and enemies (Matthew 5:43), this space must be expected to be the noisy and often conflictual place of new creation. New challenges to unity will arise; new strains will put on the chains of peace precisely *because* the Spirit will sometimes disturb “fellowship.” True *koinonia* is always of the Spirit, the wind of God that blows where it wills. Such an understanding informs our relations to the global body of Christ, where we are coming to value the differences that our histories and our diverse experiences of faithfulness and unfaithfulness have brought about. This appreciation recognizes that we belong to each other by an act of God, and that *koinonia* is a mix of listening, appreciating, exhorting, critiquing, dialoguing – all in the interests of growing closer to each other within the *koinonia* of God.

A body made up of “all things in heaven and on earth” (Ephesians 1:10) is not designed to be one of uniformity, but of God-created diversity. *Koinonia* will present different challenges in different parts of our communion. In a modern and post-modern context *koinonia* challenges our individualism, our self-sufficiency, and our power- and control-oriented culture of communication and authority. In highly homogenous parts of our communion *koinonia* may well collide with the human tendency to feel threatened by difference. And yet, *koinonia* stands for oneness in our diversity, unity in our multiplicity.

Koinonia as word, concept, and experience is a pearl of great price. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit enable us to receive this gift – again and again.

Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld is Professor of Religious Studies and Peace and Conflict Studies at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Canada, and a member of the Faith and Life Commission of MWC’s General Council.

***Note:** Yoder Neufeld’s full paper explores in greater depth the meaning of the terms associated with *koinonia* in the New Testament, laying the groundwork for the reflections excerpted here. An edited version of an initial draft of the paper is available in English in the July 2012 issue of Mennonite Quarterly Review (www.goshen.edu/mqr).

It takes imagination to see how the various Commissions of Mennonite World Conference are all, each in their own way, profound expressions of *koinonia*. All together, they help us move ever deeper into communion with God and each other. The Mission Commission represents “the *koinonia* of the gospel.” The Deacon’s Commission might, in light of 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, have been named the *Koinonia* Commission. The Peace Commission is a reminder that in light of what we have seen in the New Testament, *koinonia* is shalom in the making. And the Faith and Life Commission is engaged in nothing less than helping to forge a *koinonia* of conviction. – TYN