

## **Communion and Diversity “A Community of Anabaptist-Related Churches”**

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Dear brothers and sisters!

It is a joy to be here, with you in Harrisburg, the place of our Assembly! And it is a joy to greet you as brothers and sisters! I simply take it for granted that I may address you as brothers and sisters. This is the ultimate reason why I decided to come here: to be with my brothers and sisters, from the whole world! To meet you! To celebrate with you! To worship with you! To rejoice with you, and to lament with you! To be inspired by you! To learn from you, and to share my gifts with you! To confess my faith with you and to pray with you – and pray *for* you, as you will pray for me! It goes without saying, that I come to this place, because I am part of this communion, this “community of Anabaptist related Churches”, called Mennonite World Conference. This is my home – as much as it is yours. I count on many things we have in common: our faith in Jesus Christ, whom we confess as Lord and Saviour, our common heritage of the Radical Reformation, the Anabaptist movement of the 16<sup>th</sup> century; our way of being church, which was formed over the centuries by our common “Mennonite story”; our passion for peace and justice; our common witness and mission in this world. Yes, it is indeed a joy and a privilege to be part of this communion.

And, I admit, it is also the diversity that attracts me. The different languages you speak, the different ways you look, the different cultures you come from. I feel enriched by the different ways of singing, praying, worshipping. I want to know, how you are church in a totally different political and societal setting. I want to listen to your concerns and the challenges you encounter. I want to be informed by the way you read the Bible and how you interpret it, my brothers and sisters, because I know, from experience, how great it feels to be a global family, including all our differences, and yet being one in Christ. To be with you here informs me of how rich, colourful, beautiful and diverse “Walking with God” can be.

I could simply stop here, and invite us to a song of joy! There will be time for that later. Right now, I want to reflect with you on some challenges.

Differences are great, indeed, an expression of God’s creative power. But differences are also a symbol of humanity’s free choices. What will I do with the irritating experiences of the coming days? Songs that I really do not like? Prayers that stop me from praying along? Behaviours that I really did not expect in a community like ours? Different opinions expressed by my “brothers and sisters”, that I absolutely do not share, that I in fact contradict? What will I do with those experiences of difference, that are actually disappointing? Again, I know from experience as well, that this will also be part of the Assembly communion. Am I going to neglect those experiences? Am I going to address the issues that I find irritating? Am I supposed to judge: opinions, behaviours, people? And, on which ground would I do that?

There is a risk that this celebration of diversity can become quite superficial, if we stay in a tourist-like approach, a “cheap unity”. As long as I do not allow myself and my home congregation to be changed by the diversity experienced here in the global family, it will very easy to accept all kinds of opinions. So, am I really prepared to question my traditional way of believing by others within the global family? Am I ready to really tolerate (i.e. to *bear*) the other? Would we really change a certain opinion or behaviour, if the other feels offended by it?

Sisters and brothers, this is the topic of our gathering this morning: to raise the question of a possible tension between our beautiful comm-unity, our comm-union and the diversity we represent. Since in a true communion, we are not only responsible for each other, but we are also gathering here to hold each other accountable. This is simply what we owe each other, if we seek a true and “costly unity”.

In order to reflect on this tension, we need to focus on two aspects:

1. the communion we are, and
2. the differences we represent, in order to discern if there are limits to our differences and how we might deal with those.

## 1. The communion we are

There are many Biblical passages that one can choose in order to find an answer. And we choose a Biblical passage here in order not to start with our own definition of whom we are or called to be, as a “community of Anabaptist related churches”. Before we come to our individual Mennonite way of being church, let’s listen to what the communion of the church is in general. I choose John 17 here, Jesus’ prayer for his disciples:

### John 17: 22-23

Jesus prays: „... I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that *all of them may be one*, Father, *just as you 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. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may *be one as we are one* — I in them and you in me — so that they may be brought to *complete unity*. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

In his prayer, Jesus uses his own relation to the Father as an image for the communion of his disciples – in two ways:

- Jesus uses his relation to the Father as an image of the relations *among* his disciples; “*just as you are in me and I am in you*”; “that they may *be one as we are one*”; “so that they may be brought to *complete unity*”. The relation among the disciples is to be of the same quality as the relation among God the Father, and God, the Son.
- Jesus does not only use the divine relationship as a symbol, he prays for a *participation* of his disciples in that divine relationship: “May they also *be in us*”; “I in them and you in me”; “then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me”.

In order to understand what the quality of the relations among those who follow Christ is, we need to listen carefully to the content of this prayer of Jesus:

### 1.1. The Image: “*just as you are in me and I am in you*”

- 1.1.1. Jesus describes the relation between himself and God the Father as a dynamic community of love.
- 1.1.2. Within the divine relationship, the different “persons” (God, Son, and Holy Spirit) *participate* in each other. This doesn’t lead to a complete fusion or a merger of the persons, but they remain distinct from each other, with distinct identities.
- 1.1.3. And further: the different “persons” are constituted by that relation of love. There is no person without a relation to another. And in order to respect the individual personality of the other, it has to be a relation of love. This is what Jesus calls complete unity.

### 1.2. Participation in the divine: “*May they also be in us*”

- 1.2.1. Jesus asks for his disciples to be included in this dynamic love-relation of reciprocal participation. What an amazing thought this is!
- 1.2.2. But again: this doesn’t lead to a complete fusion or a merger of us with God, we remain distinct from each other, with distinct identities: God, the creator, and we, part of creation.

1.2.3. And yet, the different “persons” are constituted by this relation of love. God (the Divine communion) relates to the human being in love and so creates him and her in God’s image. And God so constitutes the indestructible dignity of each person. God restores that dignity in his son by justifying the sinner. And God sanctifies each life by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the theological reason, why the churches subscribe to that fundamental human right of the inviolability of the human dignity.

### 1.3. **Relating in Love: “all of *them* may be one”**

But this would be far too individualistic an understanding, if we do not see, that this is exactly what makes the union of persons, a community – in communion with God: Jesus does not pray for the individual believer here, he prays that “all of *them* may be one”, “may *they* be in us”. This tells us something about the quality of the relations among the disciples:

1.3.1. in participating in God’s love, they will be blessed by that dynamic love-relation among each other.

1.3.2. And again: this doesn’t lead to a complete fusion or a merger among the disciples, but we remain distinct from each other, with distinct identities: you and I, the self and the others.

1.3.3. And yet, the different “persons” of that human communion are constituted by this relation of love. The love among the disciples allows the other to be the other, and allows me to have my own identity. There is no community of love without distinct persons, without distinct identities. To remain distinct is precisely the condition, as it is the result of a community of love. Therefore, this relation will always respect, support, protect, and defend the dignity of each person. This is the theological reason, why the churches believe in the inviolability of church-communion – since it is participating in that divine love.

This is how God relates to the God-self, this is how God relates – and constitutes – the individual person, and this is how God relates – and constitutes – the fellowship of his disciples, the church (the communion in and among churches). This is what Jesus prays for: that God may create, sustain and perfect this unity among the disciples, a communion! And at the same time, Jesus prays that God may create, sustain and perfect the individuality of each person, the diversity among the disciples: by allowing them to participate in the divine love. And we have no reason to doubt that God would not fulfill his own prayers! Yes, we have all good reasons to celebrate this unity in diversity here again, during this Assembly in Harrisburg, since we realize more clearly now:

- it is not us who create this communion, but it is created by participating in God’s relation of love. This implies that no one can destroy this communion.
- It is not us who create that beautiful diversity of different human dignities, but it is created by participating in God’s relation of love and the love among ourselves. This implies that no one will fall out from that communion, no matter who we are: black and white and brown, tall and small, women and men, of any sexual orientation, young and old, rich and poor, etc.

To discriminate against a *person* within this community is to discriminate against that *community*. To deny the individual dignity of any person is not only touching the communion, it is questioning this very truth of the gospel. To terminate or to revoke the love among us within the communion that God constitutes is to neglect the truth of this participatory love of God.

This is who we are: a communion in diversity, created, sustained, and perfected by God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

## 2. **The differences we represent: costly unity**

If this is the communion we claim to be, then this also has to be the “framework” of our discernment about possible limits of our diversity, unity threatening and unity dividing issues. It is this communion, in which we are not only visiting each other like we visit exotic animals in a zoo, separated by security fences. Here, we are not only responsible for each other, but here, we hold each other accountable, as sisters and brothers. That might at times become difficult, frustrating, even painful. Still, if we are not ready for that, we will fail to live up to that true communion of faith in Christ, that “costly unity”.

How do we do discern the limits of diversity together in the Mennonite World Conference? Our way of expressing and living this communion is the “Mennonite way” – among all the other church traditions. There are distinct “shoulders we stand on”. Even those Mennonite communities, who do not trace back their genealogy to European ancestors, will refer to that particular history, because at some point they have adopted that Anabaptist-Mennonite story as part of their own identity. And even if we relate to this history in a self-critical way (which we should), we still use it as a reference point in order to explain how we live in communion, how we seek orientation in today’s questions of unity and diversity.

Diversity has been a challenge within the Anabaptist movement from its very beginnings in 16<sup>th</sup> C Reformation era, for several reasons. This movement did not start with a single understanding of a new face of the church, but rather developed different ideas in the many struggles in various contexts of Europe. By holding each other accountable, slowly uniting principles emerged and provided opportunities to strengthen each other, over against the dominant church of the Middle Ages. While sharing the key insight of main-stream-Reformers like Luther, Calvin, or Zwingli (e.g. that we are saved by grace through faith alone), a more radical alternative, non-conformist church emerged here. The most obvious expression of that became believers’ baptism, respecting the *individual* confession of faith, out of free choice. A first door to diversity! This community would reject any state or church authority to prescribe a certain interpretation of faith but rather opt for a non-hierarchical, and non-creedal model of “priesthood of all believers”. A second door to diversity! It became obvious that a congregational structure of the church would most appropriate. The joint Bible reading and sharing of insights should provide the wisdom to discern the will of God for a life of discipleship. A third door to diversity! Following Christ in peace and justice, as described in the Sermon on the Mount, became the leading – and discriminating – principle of this movement.

Claiming this freedom of conscience and of faith obviously posed a threat to the existing powers of state *and* clergy, who were so concerned about the unity within church and state. And many of the first and second generation Anabaptists had to pay their claim for diversity with their lives. All of that is part of our common story and continues to shape our identity as individuals, as congregations in different contexts, as well as our way of being a communion of churches together. Very diverse!

Today we understand how ambitious and demanding this congregational model is when it comes to questions of diversity. Trying to solve conflicts in non-violent ways according to Matthew 18, we see church leaders like Menno Simons himself applying the ban more and more rigorously. The history of splits and separations within our tradition is breathtaking and quite contradictory to the faith claims made. Disputes about the appropriate amount of water to be used for baptism or the kind of music to be played in worship service for example became reason enough to go separate ways and to condemn each other. Patriarchal behaviour and the misuse of uncontrolled power, victimizing individuals and stigmatizing whole groups as “heretics” are as much part of our story as it is for other churches. The inability to live up to those precious theological insights of the beginnings can be quite disillusioning. While the congregational model with believers’ baptism at the centre provides the highest possible degree of diversity within church – since it puts so much trust and respect in the individual – it seems that we have continuously failed to prove its legitimacy and practicability.

We have failed too often to cope with the diversity amongst ourselves, which, theologically speaking, we regard as a gift of the Holy Spirit. However, in praxis, we see as clear obstacles that keep us from committing ourselves deeper to this global family. Is this the reason, why we still prefer to call ourselves “Mennonite World *Conference*” instead of “Mennonite World *Communion*”? Are we afraid of the other? Are we afraid of being held accountable by the other? Are we afraid, that the other could gain power over us, instead of practicing that love-relation? Are we afraid that the differences might be too deep and destructive to our communion?

It might be helpful to differentiate two levels here:

### **2.1 On Content: *which differences are really community dividing?***

For the Prophets of the Old Testament the limit of diversity was reached when a conviction or behavior would lead to blasphemy. A violation of the very first command, which all the other commandments depend upon. Whenever the uniqueness and unity of the One God, who liberated the people of Israel from bondage and slavery, was questioned, a clear and unambiguous confession was called for, even against members of their own people, within that communion of faith. The same fact is found back in the New Testament accounts: whenever the Lordship of Christ is questioned – by words or by behaviour, tolerance does not seem to be an option any longer.

In the history of theology this is called a *status confessionis*, a situation when the confession to God revealed in Christ itself is endangered. This was the case in the 1930s, when the “German Christians” in Germany were willing to give in to the absolute authority claim of the Nazi regime, even in church affairs. In opposition, the emerging “Confessing Church” issued the *Theological Barmen Declaration* (1934). They declare:

“In view of the errors of the “German Christians” of the present *Reich church government* which are devastating the church and also therefore breaking up the unity of the German Evangelical Church, we confess the following evangelical truths:“

In the following six articles, each starting from Scripture evidences they clearly reject “false doctrines” they identify within their own community, e.g. Article 2:

(We believe in) “Christ Jesus, whom God has made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” (1 Corinthians 1:30)

“As Jesus Christ is God’s assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, in the same way and with the same seriousness he is also God’s mighty claim upon our whole life...”

“**We reject the false doctrine**, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords – areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.”

Or Article 5:

“Fear God. Honour the emperor.” (1 Pet 2.17)

“**We reject the false doctrine**, as though the state, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the church’s vocation as well.”

“**We reject the false doctrine**, as though the church, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the state, thus itself becoming an organ of the state.”

This was clearly a situation of *status confessionis*: Parts of that communion felt called to speak truth to power and to speak truth to it’s own members, drawing clear lines. The result was a split within the Evangelische Church in Germany – until the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. Still, this very *Barmen Declaration* was the basis for all of them to come together again, be united and take this Declaration as a common starting point, after total collapse of the political system. – Obviously, the limit of diversity was reached here and the writers of that confession justified their step by saying: this is not simply a difference in opinion; here the confession to Christ itself is at stake.

A similar example is the blasphemic claim of some churches in Southern Africa some 30 years ago, that the political Apartheid-system was according to God’s will. The *Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa* issued the *Belhar Confession* in 1986. Again, starting with a clear Trinitarian confession, they express their beliefs, drawing from Scripture:

“We believe: ...

that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God’s Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain (Eph. 4:1-16);

that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and

hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted (John 17:20-23);  
...that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church.”

And they follow with clear rejections:

“Therefore, we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

5. We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only head, the church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence (Eph. 4:15-16; Acts 5:29-33; 1 Peter 2:18-25; 1 Peter 3:15-18).  
Jesus is Lord...”

Thirty years ago the “white” *Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa* was suspended from its membership within the World Council of Churches, since their teachings were considered to question the sole Lordship of Christ. And it was a great joy to receive them back as full member within the WCC during last year’s meetings, after a long process of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. The Belhar Confession had clearly marked the limits of diversity, still calling for that unity that faith in Christ alone provides.

To answer our question: *which differences are community dividing?* We can now say: those opinions and behaviours that question the very confession of Christ as Lord. And we might add: this is the only case, that allows for a clear division within that communion.

## **2.2. On Methodology: How to deal with unity threatening differences?**

Today Mennonites are well known as one of the historic peace churches. We are respected for our non-violent peace building efforts and skills. In facing challenges of diversity within our own churches, that non-violent approach has also been a leading principle from the beginnings. Differences were not fought out violently – at least in most cases.

But certainly we know of indirect and psychological violence, of bans and social pressure, of divisions and condemnations amongst our own different fractions. We certainly cannot claim to be experts in conflict mediation when it comes to our own church conflicts.

Still I want to believe in the wisdom and potential of that identity marker of being a peace church. If we hold on to that key-conviction that Jesus called all his disciples to be peacemakers and to first seek the righteousness of *His* kingdom, than this characteristic of being a *church of just peace* has to inform our methodology of going about the differences within our own communion.

Including our wisdom and experience in peace building, primary questions to be asked in a conflict would then be:

1. Is the topic at stake really a question of *status confessionis* or can we tolerate (*bear*) the fact that the other, too, claim to be in line with what Scripture tells them?
2. Are we paying respect to the fact that everyone involved is and remains inviolably created in the image of God, participating in the triune love, even if our opinions or behaviors differ?
3. Are we paying respect to the fact that Jesus prays for “complete unity”, defined as a dynamic love-relation, equal to the love He shares with the Father?

These primary questions lead to the obligation to create a “safe space” for all (a *communion-space*), to process our differences, by:

1. Giving priority to the perspectives of the most vulnerable or possibly discriminated ones (the so-called “weak”)

2. Identifying the “needs” of individuals *and* the community – that may lay behind the expressed differences
3. Avoid victimizing or taking advantage of presenting oneself as victim

And in order to move such a process then, three guiding questions might help steering, according to the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5), that we share within this communion:

1. What liberates – the individual *and* the communion-relations?  
(Participating in God, who liberates from all bondage)
2. What heals/restores – the individual *and* the communion-relations?  
(Participating in Jesus Christ, who heals what is broken)
3. What saves – the individual *and* the communion-relations?  
(Participating in the Holy Spirit, who empowers with manifold gifts)

This is a spiritual journey, a communion-pilgrimage, a conciliar process, i.e. decisions will not be taken by simple voting one against the other, but by discerning God’s will together on the way. (Even within the diverse unity of the World Council of Churches we have been able to move to a consensus decision mode, and it is changing the character of the debates.)

I believe that we Mennonites, a *church of just peace*, can only uphold our very ambitious way of practicing Believer’s baptism, and claiming to be that “communion of saints” in each and every local church, if we combine this ambition with a profound humbleness – always to differentiate the absolute truth, which is only in God, from all our approximations to that truth. In the end, it is the trust *alone*, that we, in Christ, already participate in that divine love, all of us, despite our differences. And it is this trust that gives me confidence in our way of being church.

Sisters and brothers, this is the real reason why I am full of joy to take part in this Assembly. It is here that I hope to experience not only the joyful, entertaining and exciting differences amongst us, but also I hope to experience that “costly unity” in which we hold each other accountable in our differences. It is here that I hope to experience such “safe spaces”, in which I feel free to speak up, to share my own views, and it is here that I am prepared to listen to your challenging questions, with care. It is this communion in which I am prepared to dispute and to cry, even provoke, without fear.

For me, this isn’t simply the “Mennonite World Conference”. For me, this is already the “Mennonite World *Communion*”. Simply because it is you, that I consider my sisters and brothers, participating in that same divine love.

Together, we *are* “walking with God” because God has chosen to walk with us.