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Gathered into One

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Part I “All things gathered in Christ”

It is wonderful to be with so many sisters and brothers from around the world. I am reminded of the joyful and worshipful image in Psalm 133:1,2:

HOW GOOD and how pleasant it is
to live together as brothers [and sisters] in unity!
It is like fragrant oil poured on the head
and falling over the beard,
Aaron's beard, when the oil runs down
over the collar of his vestments.

I am both honoured and deeply humbled to have been asked to share with you. I am aware that as much as I have prayed for guidance, and trust the Spirit, I come with only limited understanding of your various life settings in so many places on this globe. My words will be translated by God's servants, our wonderful interpreters. But they will also be translated by every one of you who listens with ears and imaginations that have been shaped by and are attuned to your own context. Each of you brings special and distinct wisdom and insight with you. So, in the spirit of 1 Thessalonians 5:21, I invite you to test freely, to let go of what does not seem good, but also to hold on to what is good.

In his letter of invitation to our gathering here in Limuru, César Garcia, MWC General Secretary, wrote: “It is my wish that [during our gathering] we meet with God in the fullness of his Spirit, in the communion of his people, and the gift of unity in the midst of the theological and cultural diversity of our global church.”

I have been asked to address this topic of unity and diversity. Many in our MWC family have addressed this important topic in various ways over the years. That will surely continue. We will never finish addressing this topic because, as I hope to show, the unity of the Spirit of Christ does not only exist in the midst of diversity, but this unity is one *of* diversity. Such unity brings the kinds of challenges that make it necessary that we centre our life together again and again in this unity of the Spirit, the body of Christ.

The overall title for my three presentations or Bible studies is “Gathered into One.” To put it that way refers not only to being one in unity with each other, but to the “One” in whom our unity is found – Jesus Christ, “our Peace” (Ephesians 2:14). In this first presentation, I will focus on Christ as the unity we share; in the second, on what Ephesians 4:3 calls “the unity of the Spirit”; finally, on how we live in and into that unity, how we “walk” together.

Yesterday, Nelson Kraybill, MWC president, spoke of *diaspora* – dispersion, scattering – as our way of being in the world. Such scattering has many reasons. Often dispersion has been due to the displacement of war, famine and persecution. But, as our brother from Uruguay, Herman Woelk, pointed out that dispersion is central to mission. We can rightly say that our global Mennonite and Brethren in Christ family is the fruit of God’s scattering of what Arnold Snyder has called the “Anabaptist seed.”¹

My focus will not be on either the pain or the blessing of dispersion, but on God as a “gatherer” who spares no effort in gathering the alienated and broken pieces of humanity into the transforming and recreating unity in Christ. Precisely because of God’s success as a gatherer this unity is marked by deeply challenging diversity – diversities of race, language, culture, ethnicity, gender, wealth, ethics and theology.

We might be tempted to think of MWC as a human creation. Of course, we gratefully celebrate the enormous energy, wisdom, vision and skill of our hosts, our leaders, our organizers translators, and interpreters over the almost 100 years of the MWC, including here in Kenya. Much more importantly, however, we are *God’s* creation, one small gathering within God’s much grander enterprise of gathering. So, I offer these presentations as an offering of thanksgiving to God for MWC and for this gathering here in Kenya.

God is a gatherer

We know that the biblical story contains many sad chapters in which faithlessness and disobedience resulted in the devastation of exile, of being dispersed, driven from home, scattered among the nations. We often think quickly of the judgment of God, as in the case of exile in Babylon. At other times, it was human violence and oppression that led to dispersion, as in the enslavement in Egypt. The Bible emerged in exactly such settings of dispersion, exile and persecution. And the word it speaks again and again into such settings is that God is at heart a *gatherer*.

Let me illustrate with only a few examples, first from the Old Testament and then the New.

¹ C. Arnold Snyder, *From Anabaptist Seed: Exploring the historical center of Anabaptist teachings and practices* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books/ Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2008), now in sixteen languages.

The Old Testament

Deuteronomy 30:2-4

If you return to the LORD your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, **gathering** you again from all the peoples among whom the LORD your God has scattered you. Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world (Hebrew “of heaven”), from there the LORD your God will **gather** you, and from there he will bring you back.

Psalms 107:1-3

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.
Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
those he redeemed from trouble
and **gathered** in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south. (cf. Isaiah 11:12)

Isaiah 40:11

[God] will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will **gather** the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep. (cf. Jeremiah 23:3)

Zephaniah 3:19

I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at that time I will **gather** you.

Jeremiah 29

We are familiar in Anabaptist circles with Jeremiah’s letter to those who were exiled to Babylon. Chapter 29 contains the important phrase “seek the shalom of the city into which I have sent you into exile” (v. 7). This has become foundational for our understanding of God’s call to peacemaking and peacebuilding in our world. But Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles also contains these moving words (11-14):

Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your shalom and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then, when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and **gather** you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

There is one last example from the Old Testament I wish to share with you, one I have come to value especially:

Zechariah 10:8

I will “whistle” [Hebrew] for them and **gather** them in, for I have redeemed them, and they shall be as numerous as they were before.

Is that not a wonderful image of God, a shepherd “whistling” to gather us home?

The New Testament

What about the New Testament? A conviction informing the whole of the New Testament is that the promises of God come true in Christ, that the exile is over, that we are being whistled home, that humanity is being gathered together in and through Christ. The evangelists tell the story of Jesus exactly that way:

Luke 5:15

But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would **gather** to hear him and to be cured of their diseases.

It would be more accurate to say that *Jesus* gathered the crowds, the hungry, the sick, the possessed, the children. In fact, he went out to the margins of society to find them and to call them home, most especially “tax collectors and sinners” (Mark 2:13-17).

Jesus’ whole life, including his death, expresses God’s passion to gather us all in. Can we forget the heart-rending lament of Jesus at the end of his earthly life?

Luke 13:34/Matthew 23:37

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to **gather** your children together as a hen **gathers** her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

Ephesians 1:10 – The Secret is Out! God is gathering all things in Christ!

Perhaps nowhere is this divine passion to heal the divisions and hostilities marking human life more dramatically displayed than in the letter to the Ephesians. It is no accident that Ephesians has come to play an important role in the MWC. Indeed, this is so whenever Christians struggle for unity midst diversity, or when estranged Christian communions seek to come closer to each other. Ephesians is God’s great gift to us for such a time as this.

The letter opens with an act of worship, a prayer of blessing: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places!” (1:3). In the original Greek, that prayer of thankful blessing goes on for one long unbroken sentence, from verse 3 all the way to verse 14. At the centre of this prayer, in verses 9 and 10, is a divine blessing directly related to our topic. God has blessed us by revealing to us a long-held secret plan, namely, to “**gather up**” – to unite, to sum up – “all things in and through Christ, all things in heaven and on earth.” No person, no thing – nothing! – is beyond God’s gathering embrace. Clearly the horizon of such unity in Christ is way beyond our sight, beyond our imagining. Is that one reason it is called a “mystery,” a secret, one we cannot possibly grasp?

Perhaps it is also a mystery because it runs counter to the way our world typically works. Our world, torn by fear, suspicion, and hostility, is marked not so much by gathering as by getting rid of, eliminating, or at least pushing away and marginalizing that which we don’t like or which threatens us. Our common reflex as human beings is to remove that which troubles us, or those who threaten us, our identity, our community, our peace. Think of the hostility to migrants and refugees in Europe and the USA, or the spending of billions on war, weapons and walls.

But we should not point the finger too quickly at “the world.” Think of the ways we in the church, even in peace-loving Anabaptist churches, have avoided or shunned those whose views we object to, whose behaviours offend us. If only “that” or “they” were not here, we’d be at peace, we’d have unity! It turns out that such unity, such harmony, is not the unity God

intends with his gathering of all things in Christ. Let me show you from the letter to the Ephesians.

Ephesians 2:11-22 For He is “our” Peace

Ephesians is very carefully constructed to highlight the very nature and centre of the gospel. The first half of the letter, chapters 1-3, rehearse what God has done, God’s blessings. In the second half, chapters 4-6, the emphasis falls on how we as the blessed are to respond to these blessings. More on that in my last presentation.

Chapters 1-3 are very artistically shaped around one of the greatest peace texts in the whole of the Bible, 2:11-22. And within that passage our attention is drawn to the very centre of the passage, verses 14-16, indeed the centre of whole first half of Ephesians. We have arrived at the very core of God’s plan. Here we encounter a hymn or poem to Christ. Like the great hymns celebrating Christ in John 1:1-18, Colossians 1:15-20, and Philippians 2:6-11, this one celebrates the Jesus as Messiah. In this hymn, he is called “our Peace” (2:14). Let me paraphrase so we can visualize the text clearly:

Remember! You Gentiles were *once strangers and enemies*, without God and without hope (11-12)

Christ brought *near* those who were *far* through his blood (13)

Christ is our Peace

- ***He has broken down the dividing wall between “us” Jews and “you” Gentiles***
- ***Out of former strangers and enemies he has created a “New Human” in one body***
- ***He “killed” the hostility between us and between us and God through his own death on the cross (14-16)***

Christ is the “peace evangelist” to both *near* and *far*, both now have access together to their Father through the one Spirit (17, 18)

You are now *no longer strangers!*

- We, you and we together, are members of God’s one household
- You and we together are a home for God built by and with the Spirit (19-22)²

In the early decades of the church, among all the conflict-laden differences that mark life in the human community – age, sex, wealth, social standing, race, religion – no division ran deeper than that between Jews and Gentiles. For Jews especially, being separate, distinct, was very much part of what it means to be God’s people, a holy people. There are signs that this division was keenly felt also in Christian communities, and has left its mark on much of the New Testament, also on Ephesians. A number of times in the first half of the letter we run into “we” and “you”, where “we” refers to “us” Jews, “us” old-time believers, and “you” as those who come from “them” – the uncircumcised, the Godless, hopeless, outsiders, strangers, even enemies, as 2:11 and 12 show so starkly (see also 1:13 and 2:1-3).

² For fuller discussion, see Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians* (Believers Church Bible Commentary; Waterloo, ON/Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2002), 106-137. See also the “Sermon Notes” in the MWC *Worship Resources* for Peace Sunday, 2017 (https://mwc-cmm.org/sites/default/files/website_files/peace_sunday_2017_-_en_final.pdf).

Anabaptists will understand this, since we too are familiar with thinking of ourselves as different, and with looking at “the world” or other Christians – even each other! – with suspicion, even hostility.

So, this is a peace text that does not allow us to think of peace, or the peace Christ brings, in general terms or in individual terms. The readers then, and we today, must hear it in relationship to the divisions and hostilities we ourselves know and experience.

The near and the far

In 2:13, Christ brings “near” those who are “far” through his blood. In verse 17, he preaches or announces the gospel of peace (he is literally “evangelizing peace”) to both the “far” and the “near”. This is an obvious reference to Isaiah 57:19: “‘Peace, peace, to the far and the near,’ says the Lord.” And who are the far and the near? In Isaiah, “the far” are Jewish exiles in Babylon. “The near,” on the other hand, are those of “us” who stayed behind at home in Judah. In Isaiah “the far” and “the near” are all one family.

Notice now that in Ephesians 2 “the near” are Jews, and “the far” are Gentiles, described in brutal terms in 2:11 and 12 as godless strangers and enemies. As verse 19 has it, they are now no longer strangers, but members of God’s family, “our” brothers and sisters. Can you imagine what it meant for Jewish believers in Jesus who had always thought of Gentiles that way to now have Scripture used to refer to Gentiles as Isaiah’s “the far,” that is, as “us away from home”?

This required extraordinary vision, faith, and courage on the part of early believers. You and I are gathered here in Limuru because those early Jewish believers in Jesus took the enormously risky step of opening their family to include the strangers and enemies. For them to “accept Christ” was not just to accept him as their “personal saviour,” but as saviour of those they had thought of as outside of God’s horizon of salvation. But as hard as that was, both to accept such a unity, such a peace, and then to live in it, they took that enormously big step and were able to celebrate it in song and worship. And they sang it together as the new “us” made up of the old “us” and the old “you”. Maybe something this radically life changing can only be expressed in song and worshipful poetry, which makes worship and song radical acts of peace.

Verses 14-16

Verses 14-16 present us with a remarkably dense concentration of images. First of all, the peace Christ makes is a costly peace. There are, not surprisingly, images of destruction: Christ breaks down walls that divide. He strikes down the law’s function to divide Jews and Gentiles from each other. For a Jew, this could only have been code for circumcision, sabbath and kosher eating. It must have been almost unimaginably hard to sing this song of peace. But remember, this hymn was written by a Jew!

Another image of destruction indicating the costliness of peace is that the Messiah is killed on the cross. For us the cross has become an all-too-familiar symbol of our faith. It was not yet when this song was composed. The Romans were still crucifying rebels, intended to terrorize subject peoples into submission. And this is a song of peace?!

However, did you notice that in this song there is a second act of murder? By giving his life for friends and enemies, for near and far alike, Christ murders hostility, kills the enmity!

The cross has been central to Anabaptist theology – and experience! And still is for many of our sisters and brothers around the globe. It is central to our understandings of discipleship, as it must be. It is also been central to our understanding of salvation, as it must be.

So, without wanting in any way to downplay the cross in relation to the peace Christ represents, it is all the more important for us also to notice that amidst all this destructive imagery, there is also imagery of creation, of renewal. In fact, creation is core to the hymn, indeed to the whole of Ephesians. It is why walls come down, why legal boundaries are abolished, why Christ gives his life. In Christ, God gathers up all of humanity, most especially humanity torn by division, by deeply entrenched differences, including those of religion, into one body, into one “new human.” *In the One who is our Peace, God is recreating humanity.* Christ is the new Adam, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:42-49, in whose body the new human is taking shape.



Photo by Tom Yoder Neufeld

Some years ago, the Anabaptist network in the UK invited Rebecca and me to be resources to the many small groups and churches that make up the network. We also visited a small group in Coventry, and took the opportunity to visit the famous cathedral. It was destroyed by German bombing during World War II.

Here the miracle begins. A new cathedral was built and dedicated to peace immediately next to the ruins of the old. Over the altar is one of the world's largest tapestries, entitled “Christ of glory.” When I first saw the magnificent tapestry I wondered: *Does Jesus have big knees? His anatomy seems strange.* And then I had this strange thought: *Is he pregnant?* It turns out that the artist who designed the tapestry, Graham Sutherland, indeed intended to suggest a womb. You will notice that below, between the feet, is the figure of a human being. Has he emerged from the womb of Christ? And below that the crucified Christ.

I have no idea whether Sutherland ever read Ephesians 2. But he could not have been more successful in depicting the wonder of new creation in Christ, brought about through the cross. He could just as well have called the tapestry “Christ our Peace.”

“All things” are being gathered up in and through Christ, in the language of 1:10, being remade into the new human in the gracious womb of Christ. True, sometimes like Jacob and Esau, we struggle inside the womb of Christ (Genesis 25:22). And sometimes, we carry those hostilities with us into life, into our lives as communities, as churches. But the “our” in “our Peace” is always a relationship with Christ that includes even the most painful and estranging divisions and rifts. Salvation, peace with God, new birth, new creation, the emergence of the “new human,” is not something you or I experience by ourselves. “If anyone is in Christ,” Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, “there is new creation!” Too often we mistranslate, “he or she is a new creature.” We become the new human together, we are born again together with strangers and enemies, including importantly, those within the church.

We will never stop imagining what that all means. That is why it is poetry, hymn. We sing it with gratitude and hope, as a church committed to both peace and unity. And we will let the song carry us into our divisions and differences, all *within* the transforming and renewing unity God has created in Christ.

Conclusion – Anabaptists and the “gathering of all things”

Unity is at the core of MWC. We seek to find ways of expressing the unity we share as an Anabaptist community in our gatherings, our assemblies, in our Shared Convictions. Our text invites us to see even the Anabaptist community, as large and diverse as it is, as only one small part of a much larger unity, the growing body of the One who is Our Peace.

Yet, I suspect that this way of thinking is a bit strange for us Anabaptists. In some ways, we are more at home with being at the margins than to be pulled into a grand cosmic unity, more at home with exile and diaspora than home, more cross than womb of new creation. That orientation began early, with dispersal from Switzerland, Austria, Germany and the Netherlands. And it fits our experience in the present in many of our contexts.

We're not only more at home on the margins, but also more at home with distinctions, differentiating ourselves from others – from the world, but also from other Christians, indeed, from each other! At our best, we see ourselves as a separated, disciplined, holy community, not conformed to this world. To be sure, there is much in the Bible that supports this, and there is much good that has come from this in our tradition. We should be deeply grateful for

- an understanding of church as a covenanted community that takes discipleship seriously;
- that has members promise at baptism to participate in the give and take of mutual correction and counsel;
- that believes that to follow Jesus is essential to believing in him, including the refusal of violence.

This emphasis was an important corrective to a church that had too often become indistinguishable from the world, its character and mission deeply compromised.

We're thus more at home with the image of the church not as womb into which all things are gathered, including estranged and hostile humanity, but as a pure bride, one without spot or wrinkle, to use the imagery of Eph 5 (see also 2 Peter 3:14), so beloved of early Anabaptists. Sadly, we have been so concerned about being different from those around us that we have had great difficulty admitting to and thus repenting of the brokenness and sin that still clings to us, whether we think of materialism, sexism, racism and all number of other “-isms” that mark both individual and communal life. We might add schism to these “-isms,” what has in German been called the “*Täuferkrankheit*,” the “Anabaptist disease.” In other words, we are so concerned to be different that we have trouble with difference.

In recent years, to be sure, in some parts of the MWC family of churches, personal purity, holiness and concern for correct belief has been replaced by nonviolence and peacemaking as the centre of discipleship and of Anabaptist identity. Even there, however, we often desire to distinguish ourselves from others, also within the global Christian community. We continue to want to be a virtuous minority, but, perhaps because of that, have difficulty acknowledging the violence that lurks in our own hearts and minds and expresses itself in the often most intimate relationships.

Yes, separation from the world is biblical. As Paul reminds us in Romans 12:2, we are not to be conformed to this age, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. I do not want to dismiss that for a moment. But today, my concern is to have us see how much *unity*, God's gathering of “all things” in Christ, including all the broken and alienated pieces of humanity, is at the very heart of God's desire for this beloved world. “God so loved the world,” John 3:16 says. “Indeed,” verse 17 goes on to say, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the cosmos, but in order that the cosmos might be saved through him.”

Psalm 24:1 was a favorite among early Anabaptists: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, and all who live in it." We can hear those words in relation to our topic: "The whole world is the Lord's, and all things in it." God therefor wishes to gather all of it, all of "us," every bit of us, and all of "them," including everything that divides us, into the Christ who makes all things new.

This cannot be anything other than a miraculous and tension-filled, diversity-filled unity. Unity in Christ is not a state of harmony, let alone uniformity. It is not achieved by agreement. It is a dynamic, restless work of God who in Christ is gathering strangers and enemies together into one body in order to bring to birth the new human. Unity is God's gift, not our achievement. It is the ground of our being. Our understanding of the church at its truest, of discipleship at its most radical, of faithfulness at its most committed, will have such unity and a passionate hunger for it at its centre. That is what we will explore yet further in the days ahead.

At time of writing, Thomas R Yoder Neufeld is chair of the Faith and Life Commission. He is retired as professor of religious studies (New Testament) and peace and conflict studies at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.