

Seven Shared Convictions of Mennonite World Conference

2 Corinthians 5:17-20 by Patty Friesen (Ash Sunday, Feb. 11/24)

Today's epistle reading about becoming a new creation in Christ was one of Menno Simons' favourite scriptures who believed that repentance and a transformation of heart and mind in Christ created ethical behavior in the followers of Christ. On this Ash Sunday, we return once again to this invitation to repentance as symbolized in ashes and as God's ongoing work of transformation in us. We may want to express this after the sermon with getting the sign of the cross in ashes on the back of our hand or forehead with the reminder of our mortality – from dust we came, to dust we will return.

In our series on Reimagining Anabaptism: Past, Present, Future as we discern our own congregational future, we have been checking the rearview mirror at the beginnings of Anabaptism and its desire to follow Christ in the most pure forms it could imagine - through martyrdom. Today we shift our view from the past in the rearview mirror to the driver's side mirror to see who is driving beside us on this modern-day Anabaptist highway, what are they driving and are they passing us?

Slide 1 – MWC Map What are we driving in North America? I propose that in North America we are probably driving a school bus that is a little rowdy and a little slow. While European Mennonites have almost completely disappeared making up less than 3% of global Anabaptists and North American Mennonites are on the decline at 30%, Anabaptism is exploding in Africa@36% and Asia and Latin America together at 32%. Ethiopia will host Mennonite World Conference in 2028 - the same year as our congregation's 100th anniversary so it might be neat to send some youth to Ethiopia in

honour of our 100th anniversary. We should start budgeting for that now. Who wants to go to Ethiopia? And how old will you be in 4 years?

Slide 2 – Grace – This is the new face of modern Anabaptism. This is who is in our driver side view mirror in the passing lane on the Anabaptist highway and she is likely riding in a mini-bus in Nairobi called a Matata. This is Grace Leah Ogiache from Kenya who graduated from Meserete Kristos Seminary in Nazareth Ethiopia in 2022. She serves the Kenyan Mennonite Church. Anabaptism came to Ethiopia and Kenya in the 1950's – not through traditional missionaries because they were not allowed into Ethiopia but through Mennonite-run hospitals. Interest in Anabaptism came with Mennonite nurses and doctors who would pray before and after surgeries. After what had been a period of slow growth, a spiritual Anabaptist awakening began in 1973. The Meserete Kristos church is far more charismatic and Pentecostal than most of its sister Mennonite churches in North America. Churches practice faith healing, exorcism of demons, and speaking in tongues.

With the coming of the communist military rule (known as the Derg) in 1974 the government closed all 14 congregations of the Meserete Kristos Church and detained five of its leaders for four years. The church no longer officially met during this time, choosing instead to meet in small house churches. Mennonite Central Committee continued to carry on agricultural development work, reforestation, resettlement of refugees, and distribution of food in times of famine. Even though the church was in hiding during the Derg years, membership grew dramatically underground in house churches with many secret baptisms in bathtubs. In 1982 the church had 5,000 members. By the time the Derg government had fallen in 1991, the church had grown to 53 congregations

and 34,000 members. In 1994, 50,000 Meserete Kristos members gathered in a stadium to publicly congregate for the first time in 20 years. The church in Ethiopia reminds me of early Anabaptism in Switzerland and Holland that grew despite or because of persecution.

Slide 3 - This is Sunoko Lin from Indonesia, treasurer of Mennonite World Conference. Lin is also in the passing lane right behind Grace and he is probably driving an electric scooter which is popular in Indonesia. Two years ago, Pastor Nora went to Indonesia for Mennonite World Conference in 2022. The presence of the Indonesian Anabaptist-Mennonites is very significant in the history of the Anabaptists worldwide, for it brings a new light not only on “Who are the Anabaptists?” but also “Who are the Anabaptists’ neighbours?” By being present in a country such as Indonesia with the largest Muslim group in the world, now we can say that the Anabaptist’s neighbours are not only Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists, but Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists as well.

In Indonesia, the churches are known simply as Christians. There is no explicit distinction between denominational backgrounds such as Anabaptists, Calvinists, Lutherans, etc. Living in the largest Muslim majority country in the world that officially recognizes six religious groups, Indonesian churches do not have much interest in exposing denominational backgrounds. The churches are active in mission and evangelism while putting aside distinctive denominational backgrounds.

Yet in the past couple of decades, there has been a growing interest among the Anabaptist-Mennonites, especially the youth, to learn and understand Anabaptism better. Some Anabaptist theology and history books have been translated into the Indone-

sian language so that both church leaders and laypeople can study them. This movement has made more Anabaptist-Mennonites bolder in identifying themselves as a distinct denomination of Mennonites.

The Indonesian Anabaptist-Mennonites have been involved heavily in interfaith peacebuilding. Some works of this interfaith peacebuilding have to do with disaster response. Some others involve training and workshops for mediation and peacebuilding. The Anabaptist-Mennonites have also taken initiative, helped by Mennonite Central Committee, to open a master's-level peace and conflict studies at a Christian university. This has been the first study program to be recognized by the Indonesian government. This initiative has resulted in peacebuilding courses now offered at all levels in many Christian universities in Indonesia.

Many Anabaptist-Mennonite churches and individuals have also taken the initiative to create alternative education and communities that foster peace. This includes things such as designing curriculum and doing joint efforts with Islamic boarding schools to establish a peace library. The church's mission is understood and practiced not as proselytism, but as reconciliation.

Anabaptism is growing in East Africa and Southeast Asia because of their unique, alternative religious message and people who are attracted to that. Our challenge in North America on the school bus is that we have relied on emigration of other Mennonites or growth of our own families to keep our churches alive. We have been the quiet in the land with regard to putting ourselves out there and inviting others to Christ and Christ's way of peace. That's something we can learn from our global sisters and

brothers. Finally, the gift of global Anabaptism is the seven beautiful shared convictions of Mennonite World Conference. Let's look at #925 in Voices Together.

(slide 4) By the **grace** of God, we **seek to live and proclaim** the good news of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. As part of the one body of Christ at all times and places, we hold the following to be central to our belief and practice:

1. **God** is known to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Creator who seeks to restore fallen humanity by calling a people to be faithful in fellowship, worship, service and witness.
2. **Jesus** is the Son of God. Through his life and teachings, his cross and resurrection, he showed us how to be faithful disciples, redeemed the world, and offers eternal life.
3. As a **church**, we are a community of those whom God's Spirit calls to turn from sin, acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, receive baptism upon confession of faith, and follow Christ in life.
4. As a faith community, we accept the **Bible** as our authority for faith and life, interpreting it together under Holy Spirit guidance, in the light of Jesus Christ to discern God's will for our obedience.
5. The **Spirit** of Jesus empowers us to trust God in all areas of life so we become peacemakers who renounce violence, love our enemies, seek justice, and share our possessions with those in need.
6. We **gather** regularly to worship, to celebrate the Lord's Supper, and to hear the Word of God in a spirit of mutual accountability.
7. As a **world-wide** community of faith and life we transcend boundaries of nationality, race, class, gender and language. We seek to live in the world without conforming to the

powers of evil, witnessing to God's grace by serving others, *caring for creation*, and inviting all people to know Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

If these convictions resonate with anyone despite hearing about all the good, bad and the ugly of Anabaptist history these past Sundays and if anyone would like to explore our spiritual history and beliefs more deeply or is ready to make an inner commitment to Christ public through baptism or re-baptism or transfer membership - please talk to Luke or I. We love baptizing people.

Ash Slide - As we enter this season of Lent this week - we are all invited to a season of spiritual renewal with our Christian sisters and brothers around the world beginning with the imposition of ashes on our forehead or back of our hand, as a reminder that we walk with Jesus towards Good Friday and Easter these next 40 days. Folks wanting ashes may come forward and Dave and I will impose them. If you would like to stay in the pew and receive them - please raise your hand and someone will bring you ashes.