

COME AND BE ONE IN CHRIST

Philippians 2:1-11

First Mennonite Church

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We are Anabaptists. Out of the world's 2 billion+ Christians, we form a modest stream of 1.5 million believers, typically identifying ourselves as Mennonites, Church of the Brethren, and Brethren in Christ. Our witness stretches around the globe, with churches in close to seventy countries and worship in some eighty languages. Increasingly, the demographics are weighted toward the Global South, where the majority of our population now resides. There are more baptized Mennonites in Ethiopia than in any other country and the most vibrant membership growth is taking place in Africa and Latin America. Fittingly, the last Mennonite World Conference (MWC) assembly was held in Zimbabwe in 2003 and the 2009 gathering will take place in Paraguay in July.

Today's text from the second chapter of Paul's letter to the church at Philippi was selected as the guiding scripture for the upcoming MWC assembly. Paul's call for unity clearly spoke to the organizing committee in Paraguay, where German-speaking, Spanish-speaking, and indigenous churches have taken on the challenge of working together in substantive, new ways in order to host brothers and sisters from around the world. Of course, the unity theme also has deep meaning for the global communion of churches that is MWC. I want us to ponder today the posture that Paul describes as appropriate to Christian fellowship and connect it to the commitments we make as a congregation and as individuals.

Writing from prison, Paul seeks to encourage the Christians in Philippi so they will stand "firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by [their] opponents" (1:27b-28a). Paul goes on to elaborate the theme of having one mind, or being of the same mind, in this first section of chapter 2. In the Greek, verses 1-4 are actually one long, complicated sentence, giving instructions on how to be of the same mind. The believers are to put away any thoughts motivated by selfish ambition, clothe themselves in humility, and focus on the needs of others. Simply put, the attitude or mind they are to share is that which was modeled by Jesus (verse 5): "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Each believer is to emulate the attitude of Christ. This shared attitude then becomes the basis of unity in love.

Paul elaborates on the example of Jesus by citing the text of a hymn familiar to the early church (verses 6-11). The hymn, which was perhaps a baptismal hymn, emphasizes how Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" and "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross." Jesus' willing submission, his non-violence and sacrificial love, become the touchstone for his followers. His exaltation and eternal victory are conveyed in the final stanza, where Jesus Christ is acknowledged as the name above every name, the Lord and Savior of all.

Oneness in Christ means confessing Christ together. It means declaring external markers of difference unimportant and the model of Christ all-important. It means humbly serving each

other and gladly receiving others' gifts. Reciprocity is essential. Unless we who are privileged in a worldly sense learn to place ourselves in the humble posture of recipient, we will not be able to claim true *koinonia* or fellowship.

Naturally our material resources here at First Menno far exceed those of new immigrant congregations like Philadelphia's Abundant Life Chinese Mennonite Church, which I visited a few months ago, and congregations like our Colombian sister church, with which a number of you have first-hand experience. I praise God that we are able to be financial partners in the feeding ministry for displaced children run by El Divino Redentor and that we were able to assist with a van replacement last year. Also that among other mission outreach, we provided special funding to MWC in 2008 for delegate travel from countries that would otherwise not be able to participate in this year's Paraguay assembly.

At the same time, we have much to learn from these fellow Christians *spiritually*--about joy in the Lord, about self-denial and obedience, about prayer vigils and fasting, and about relating the Biblical narrative to our own lives.

Several experiences I had while at seminary demonstrated to me the power of reading the Gospel with sisters and brothers in Latin America. Here is one story:

On Saturday, January 13, 2007, our AMBS study group arrived in Carranza, a community on the far outskirts of Guatemala City. There we lodged with local families and experienced the hospitality and worship life of Guatemala's youngest Mennonite church, the Anabaptist New Covenant Church. Church member Lucia was my host.

Lucia is a wife and mother in her early 50s, raised as a Catholic, trained as a bookkeeper, and like her husband, a diabetic. Lucia manages the household economy, which includes a fruit orchard; coffee, lentil, and corn cultivation; and raising poultry--chickens and ducks. The scale is modest, but the production supplies much of the family's needs and also garners some cash income from neighbors who drop by to purchase eggs and citrus.

The church is just down the street from Lucia's home. The congregation is thrilled with their one-room building, constructed from salvaged materials. That Saturday evening, we arrived at church early for the young people's service. While her son Dario set up the musical instruments, Lucia and I sat on the molded plastic chairs and she told me about her attraction to New Covenant Church. She spoke with passion about the broad participation of the congregation and the active and visible role of women in worship. Above all, she said, being encouraged as a layperson to read the Bible had a special appeal.

Each of us had brought our Bibles. I turned to Luke 13:31-35, the passage I would be preaching on a few weeks later at College Mennonite Church in Goshen – the passage where Jesus compares himself to a mother hen who wants to gather her brood protectively under her wings. Lucia put on her glasses, found the passage in her Spanish Bible and studied it intently. Then she looked up at me confidently and proclaimed boldly – “Now isn't that just the way, the fox is always out to get the hen!”

Why yes, there it was, Herod the fox and Jesus the hen. Eyes to see. Lucia saw with the eyes of a subsistence farmer, a woman with a hen house. Ears to hear. Lucia listened to Jesus as someone constantly alert to powerful forces that threaten the well being of her family and herself. She grasped a truth that passed by my book-learning saturated brain and comfortable North American lifestyle.

The biblical narrative is clear--God privileges those on the margins. Reading the Gospel with sisters and brothers from the global south has given me new eyes to see and new ears to hear God's Word. Thanks be to God for that!

As our Sister Church relationship continues to deepen and pastor Israel's health returns, I pray that we will find ways to share in Bible study and perhaps exchange sermons on a common text and in various other ways be strengthened by the spiritual example of the El Divino Redentor congregation.

Global connections can even enliven our appreciation of the Anabaptist heritage. The Anabaptist movement (remember that the term Ana-baptist refers to those who practiced re-baptism) began with a small band of 16th-century European reformers, who felt convicted to obey—even to martyrdom—the Biblical witness as opposed to the authority of the state. As historian John Roth notes, “Although the Mennonite churches in the north have done much to keep alive a historical memory of the Anabaptist movement, it is Mennonites in the Global South who are reliving that sixteenth-century experience of renewal, persecution, suffering, and growth.”¹ In dialogue with these fellow believers, we can access defining experiences akin to those of our Anabaptist forebears. We can better grasp the depth of suffering and struggle that attach to faithful witness in adversity. We can learn important things about carrying the gospel of peace into situations of repressive violence.

At the end of a week saturated with rhetoric about unity and hope in terms of our political life and national identity, it is fitting that we remind ourselves how Christian discipleship equips us in a unique way to seek and practice unity beyond national borders.

In his provocative book about the rise of global Christianity, Philip Jenkins not only maps the demographic trends favoring continued church growth in the Global South, but also discusses some of the persistent strains around worship style and biblical interpretation that divide the Body of Christ.² It's awfully easy, isn't it, for us to let externals get in the way—to dismiss worship that we might personally find uncomfortable because it is too charismatic or boisterous, for example. That's when we need to remember where Paul places the emphasis – on sharing the mind of Christ, on inner attitude. When we come together in the way of Jesus, we focus not on our comfort but on others. We recognize and respect “other people's worth, no matter their different ways of doing things. By doing so we break barriers of prejudice, envy, jealousy, and rivalry,” Elfriede Veron writes in the most recent issue of the MWC magazine.³

¹ John D. Roth, *Stories: How Mennonites Came to Be* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2006), p. 191.

² Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³ Elfriede Veron, “Humility and unity will carry us to victory,” *Courier/Correo/Courier* 2008, no. 4, p. 16.

Two Methodist churches—one black and one white--have inhabited the same block in Washington, D.C. for a century. This past week, according to an article in *The New York Times*, the two congregations tried yet again to bridge the gap between them, in jointly hosting presidential inauguration visitors. One of the pastors is quoted as saying, “We did not choose but it was chosen for us that we would come together at this moment. If we want to be the heart of our community, we need to learn to see into each other’s heart.”⁴

Seeing into each other’s heart...having the same mind....emulating the attitude that Christ Jesus brought to his life and to his death.....grasping in this attitude of humility the commitments at the core of our Christian faith. This is how we are to relate.

As a bulletin insert, you have the Shared Convictions adopted in 2006 by the General Council of Mennonite World Conference. In fairly accessible language, seven central aspects of the good news of reconciliation are set out. Note that Jesus Christ is the thread that connects every one of the articles. Note the stated reference in the conclusion to the radical discipleship to Jesus Christ that characterized our 16th century forebears. Note in point 4 the authority of the Bible. Note the clear expression in point 5 about renouncing violence, loving our enemies, seeking justice, and sharing our possessions with those in need. Note the focus in point 6 on worship and congregational life in a spirit of mutual accountability. Note the expression of unity beyond diversity in point 7 and the preamble reference to the unbounded unity that exists through the “one body of Christ at all times and places.”⁵

Today we give thanks for our global Anabaptist church family, for bonds of fellowship knitting us together, for the gifts of our brothers and sisters, for the humility that is sown in us through these connections, bringing us closer to Christ, and to the oneness that Jesus prayed would be ours.

⁴ Michael Powell, “2 Churches, Black and White, See Inaugural Hope,” *The New York Times*, January 19, 2009, accessed on-line.

⁵“Shared Convictions,” March 15, 2006, available on <http://www.mwc-cmm.org>. For an in-depth reflection, see Alfred Neufeld, *What We Believe Together* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2007).