

MWC and Communion

According to its vision statement, MWC is called to be a 'communion' of churches, a *koinonia* of churches:

Mennonite World Conference is called to be a communion (Koinonia) of Anabaptist-related churches linked to one another in a worldwide community of faith for fellowship, worship, service, and witness.

During the past two decades, 'communion' as a translation of the biblical word 'koinonia' has become a core word and concept to describe MWC's vocation and life together. No doubt that is why César has asked me to offer a few thoughts today on the theme 'Mennonite World Conference and Communion' and tomorrow on the subject 'Leadership and Communion'. I hope that these comments will be of some use to you, General Council members, in the days ahead – including those of you who already heard today's presentation when we met in Indonesia.

There was in César's invitation to me evidence of compassion for an ex-General Secretary. He said that I did not need to take the time to create something new but could instead use materials that I had written years ago about communion – materials now included in the *Mennonite World Conference Reference Notebook (RN)*. I did look at the *RN* documents, though not only those that I had contributed. In it, I rediscovered good presentations about 'communion' that others had made during the time I was general secretary and I discovered good materials produced since then. It is primarily the materials produced by others that have become the 'scripture' for this presentation.

If you do not already know all of the *Reference Notebook* documents by heart, I encourage you to read them again! They contain a wealth of information and insight that is much greater than what we can give and receive in the few moments we have today.

But before turning to 'communion' according to the *Reference Notebook*, I would like to turn to the Bible. I would like to set before our eyes a few verses of the Bible that have risen to the top of my mind through more than 35 years of a pilgrimage seeking to contribute to unity in the body of Christ, the church. These verses are not about the church, at least not about the church as we usually think of it. They are about something much greater than the church, something of which the church is but one part, yet something for which communion in the church is an essential instrument.

Ephesians 1:9-10

*With all wisdom and insight,
God has made known to us the mystery of his will,
According to his good pleasure,
that he set forth in Christ,
as a plan for the fullness of time,
to gather up all things in him,
things in heaven,
and things on earth.*

As we think today and tomorrow about communion in the church, let's keep in mind that, according to Paul, God's unity plan is immeasurably bigger than the plan we might have in mind. As Thomas Yoder Neufeld says in his commentary on Ephesians, it seems impossible to fully grasp this image of universal, cosmic, and eternal unity. The vision is broad to the extreme

and embracing to the utmost. Nothing – no thing, no person, no one living, no one no longer living – is beyond the reach of God’s love or outside the unity that results from God’s grace.

The unity in Christ that God is creating reaches to the edges of space and time and beyond – and includes us all even when we don’t include each other! As we see in the following chapters of Ephesians, the church is to be an instrument of this unity by bringing hostile people together within itself. But I have the impression that even if we fail to do so – even if we divide and splinter instead of reconcile and unite – that God will find some way to work around our failures. Church-dividing beliefs and communion-fracturing behaviors will in the end pass away. They will not be the last word. If Paul is right, God’s creation of cosmic unity in Christ will be the final future. May we allow this bigger picture to relativize our visions and plans, our successes and failures. I think doing so can be both humbling and encouraging!

Conference, community, communion

As I read through the *RN*, my mind focused on two parts of communion: the beginning of communion and the end of communion. In this context, permit me to suggest several questions to keep in mind during and after this presentation:

- When have you experienced communion growing in MWC?
- When have you/your church experienced the limits of communion in MWC?

At the time of the 2018 General Council meeting, our beloved brother Alfred Neufeld published his last book: *Becoming a Global Communion: Theological Developments in Mennonite World Conference from 1925 to 1975*. At first, I found the title somewhat surprising, even inaccurate. During those fifty years, MWC did not use the word ‘communion’ to describe its calling. During its first decades, MWC thought of itself primarily as an occasional event, as a periodic ‘conference’.

But by the time the 6th ‘conference’ convened in 1957 the sense of belonging together had grown sufficiently strong to think of organizing further with a first constitution and some additional words to characterize MWC’s purpose: ‘fellowship’ and ‘brotherhood’:

- *The purpose of MWC ‘is to bring the Mennonites of the world together in (...) brotherly fellowship. It seeks thereby to strengthen for them the awareness of the worldwide brotherhood in which they stand’ (first MWC Constitution, 1957, Karlsruhe, Germany).*

The second constitution, approved by the Executive Committee (‘Presidium’) two decades later, in 1976, retained ‘fellowship’ terminology:

- *The purpose of the Mennonite World Conference is to bring together in fellowship the Mennonites, Brethren in Christ and related Anabaptist bodies world-wide.(...) To provide opportunities for fellowship and mutual encouragement on a world-wide basis, believing that this fellowship will find greater meaning and depth as we together seek closer faithfulness to Christ (second MWC constitution, 28 July 1976, Semarang, Indonesia).*

At least as early as the beginning of the 1960s, the language of *koinonia* and ‘community’ was finding its way into the MWC world. H.S. Bender, MWC president 1952-1962 put it this way:

The most expressive New Testament term for the common life in the Body of Christ is the Greek word koinonia, which is best translated ‘fellowship. ‘Community’ is the term to designate the group which has fellowship. (...). The root idea in koinonia is ‘participation

in something in which others also participate, 'that is, conscious sharing with someone else in joint possession, usually on a continuing basis' (H.S. Bender, MWC President 1952-62, 1962. RN, 69).

Historically, many in Anabaptist-Mennonite circles used the word 'communion' to refer to the Lord's Supper. It referred more commonly to one of the 'ordinances' than to a fundamental concept of Anabaptist-Mennonite ecclesiology. For that, we often used the word 'community', as did H.S. Bender, usually in reference to local congregations.

But in the latter part of the 20th century in the wider Christian church, *koinonia* became a shared foundational ecclesiological concept, especially when referring to the church universal, and it was usually translated 'communion'. MWC leadership took note of that development and began to use the term also in Mennonite World Conference, both to acknowledge the member churches' growing desire for more relationship and to nudge us toward deeper relationships.

Yet, when we were developing the MWC 'Vision' and 'Mission' statements there were mixed feelings among MWC members about this terminology. There was broad agreement that we were called to be more than an occasional 'conference' and, indeed, were becoming a 'community'. But opinions about moving from 'community' language and objectives to 'communion' language and objectives were more divided. That is one of the reasons both terms are in the Vision statement, adopted by the General Council in 2003 (in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe) and included in the current constitution, adopted in 2009 (in Asuncion, Paraguay):

*Mennonite World Conference is called to be a **communion** of Anabaptist-related churches linked to one another in a worldwide **community** of faith for fellowship, worship, service, and witness.'*

This formulation reflects a particular moment of both development and hesitation in MWC's life and semantic world!

Has the situation changed since the Vision statement was adopted 19 years ago? There does indeed seem to be significant change: you are now considering changing MWC's name to one that replaces 'conference' with 'communion'. Communion has become an MWC core word signifying a very big thing! According to the *2018 General Council Workbook*:

***Communion** suggests a body committed to relationships of sacrificial love, accountability, and mutual aid (Koinonia) for the purpose of fellowship, worship, service and mission.*

If this is indeed what we now mean in MWC by *koinonia*, by 'communion', it seems like a very high calling – "Mennonite World Conference is **called** to be a **communion** of Anabaptist-related churches (...)."

Is fulfilling this calling realistic? Is it even possible? Is it possible for a group of churches, all of whom claim to be autonomous, as do MWC member churches, to be in 'communion' with each other?

In this kind of situation, which is MWC's 'constitutional' situation, where does one even begin? Where does 'communion' begin?

The Beginning of Communion

In July 1998, three months prior to the start of the first dialogue between MWC and the Catholic Church, the Executive Committee approved the statement, “God Calls Us to Christian Unity”. The introductory paragraphs conclude with these words: “We see Christian unity (...) not as an option we might choose or as an outcome we could create, but as an urgent imperative to be obeyed” (RN 2.2).

However, MWC’s emerging theology of communion as found in the *Reference Notebook* uses primarily a different language, a warmer language, a language more of grace than of law. It speaks not of an ‘imperative to be obeyed’ but of a ‘**gift**’ to be received. Communion is like salvation: it begins as **gift**, a gift from God. All we need to do initially is receive it.

In his introduction to the *RN*, César writes: we are “aware that *Communion* is a **gift** from God made possible by the Spirit’s work in the new creation which we are a part of (...).”

For Fernando Enns, too, in “Communion and Diversity: ‘A Community of Anabaptist-related Churches’”, ‘*koinonia* is founded by the **gift** of faith in the triune God. It is granted by the Holy Spirit. (...) the community of believers is a **gift** of God, through which God draws humankind into the realm of his gracious, unselfish love” (RN 5.2).

Thomas Yoder Neufeld entitles his article on the subject: “Koinonia – The **Gift** We Hold Together”. *Koinonia*, he writes, “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**.” We might think that *koinonia* lessens ‘differences that can bring conflict.’ Quite the contrary, says Tom, “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.’ And Tom continues, ‘*Koinonia* as word, concept, and experience is a pearl of great price” (RN 3.3).

In John 17, we read of Jesus’ prayer for his disciples at the last supper: ‘I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. (...) that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me.’ (John 17:20ff).

God’s gift of communion to us – that pearl of great price, is it not God’s answer to Jesus’ prayer for us?

How does the gift of communion become practical? It becomes practical in gift sharing. Global gift sharing as perhaps the most concrete expression of the gift of communion received from God has been explicitly at the heart of MWC for at least 25 years: with the setting up of the Global Church Sharing Fund, the initiation of the Global Gift Sharing program in the years following, the approval of the current constitution – according to which all MWC members and associate member commit themselves to ‘sharing gifts within the MWC community and the wider body of Christ’, and also the development of commissions and networks ever since.

But as a matter of fact, gift sharing has been at the heart of MWC since the very beginning. A Russian-Ukrainian Mennonite statement to the participants of the first MWC gathering referred gratefully to the assistance – the gifts – Russian-Ukrainian Mennonites had received from other Mennonites following the difficult years of the Russian revolution and the first world war, then asked how they could do something in return. Mennonites in Russia, the statement said, do not have silver or gold. We used to have both. Now we are poor. And yet we have something to give. We can **give** the testimony that Christian faith is no delusion (Alfred Neufeld, *Becoming a Global Communion*, 26).

So, Alfred was right with the title of his book. Through the nine world 'conferences' held during the first 50 years of MWC, the Anabaptist-Mennonite worldwide family was indeed receiving the gift of global 'communion'. The 'world conference', the 'global assembly' was and still is a primary instrument for receiving the gift of 'communion' in the body of Christ, which is God's answer to Jesus' prayer, which is the gift that we hold together

The end of communion?

Thus far we have been thinking about communion as a gift God gives to the church. According to MWC's theology as it appears in the *Reference Notebook*, communion begins when God gives it as a gift for us to hold together. But when does communion end? Can it end? Or more pointedly, should a disciple of Jesus Christ ever take the initiative to end communion? Should a church ever take the initiative to end communion with another church?

There is next to nothing about this in the *Reference Notebook*. It tells us when communion begins but, as far as I could see, not when it ends or how it ends or even if it can end. The constitution does not give MWC the power to excommunicate any of its members nor does it even indicate how members can leave the communion. It calls on them/us to make commitments – commitments to:

- affirm MWC's Vision, Mission, Shared Convictions;
- participate in the whole life of MWC;
- make Fair Share contributions;
- share gifts within the MWC community and the wider church.

But it doesn't say what MWC will do if members don't keep these commitments! There are documents and parts of documents in the *RN* on reconciling during or after disagreement and conflict. But they don't say that MWC will take the initiative to end the relationship if disagreement and conflict persist.

Who can take the initiative to end communion and under what circumstances? We know that Anabaptist-Mennonite history to the present is littered with fractured relationships, with division, with broken communion. We believe that marriages should last 'until death do us part'. But we don't seem to believe as strongly that communion should last 'until death do us part' – even though what is at stake is not just a couple of human bodies but the body of Christ! Sometimes we even seem to feel that splitting is one of our special 'gifts', thinking that we do it more often than anyone else! But be reassured, my experiences with other Christian World Communions for several decades lead me to think that we may not be quite as special in this way as we fear! Still, we do rate very highly on the list of those who 'inflict wounds on the body of Christ'. And we have even developed a spiritual justification for this practice.

We know from John 17 and other New Testament passages that faithful discipleship includes unity of the disciples. We even know from the John passage that Jesus believed that oneness is the very part of discipleship that will lead the world to believe! Yet, in our tradition do we not often separate these two things – on the one hand there is discipleship, on the other hand there is unity – then proceed to conclude that discipleship is more important than unity, that following Jesus in the world is more important than oneness in the body of Christ?

I recently asked a Mennonite sociologist, who has interviewed many Anabaptist-Mennonite leaders in the region where he lives, what he thinks 'unity' means to them. For most, he replied, I think it means 'compromise', seeking oneness in Christ leads to compromising obedience to Jesus.

One of my most memorable moments in MWC dialogues with other Christian World Communions came when a leader of the Catholic Church delegation said quietly: 'When we break communion in the Body of Christ, we wound Jesus Christ himself.' We pain him, we pain him again and again. We make him suffer, we make him suffer again and again. Before that moment and still more since it, I have not been able to say 'yes' to the following questions: If I am fully following Jesus in life, may I *ever* take the initiative to break communion in the Body of Christ? Does radical discipleship *ever* require me to take the initiative to break communion? May I ever voluntarily give up the **gift** that God has given to us to hold together?

There is one place in the *Reference Notebook* that seems to point in such a direction. In his reflection "Communion and Diversity: 'A Community of Anabaptist-related Churches'" (5.5), Fernando Enns, distinguishes between differences which allow for division within the communion and those which should not be tolerated. He writes:

'For the prophets of the Old Testament, the limit of diversity was reached when a conviction or behavior would lead to blasphemy. (...) A clear and unambiguous confession was called for, even against members of their own people, within the communion of faith.'

Within the New Testament, '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 of God revealed in Christ itself is endangered'

The basic question for me in Fernando's examples is this: who broke communion with God and within the people of God? The prophets or those whom they were calling to account? Not the prophets, I think. Of course, they did not avoid controversial and divisive issues. True, they said and did provocative things. But when doing so they remained *within* the community and it was within the community that they spoke out. They stayed there, spoke there, even though it was precisely that posture – speaking out while remaining within – that led to their own pain, suffering, and sometimes exclusion from the community.

Was it not the same with Jesus? Did Jesus ever take the initiative to break communion? True, he certainly did not avoid controversial and divisive issues. And, yes, he certainly did and said provocative things. But didn't he always do so from *within* the community, speaking out while trying to remain within communion, remaining within it to the end? Wasn't it precisely this posture that led to the cross and allowed the resurrection?

We would need to take a closer look at the Gospels to test this reading. But the interaction at the Last Supper – the supreme moment of 'communion – may be revelatory, especially the interaction between Jesus and Judas, between Jesus and Peter.

Judas had already made a plan to betray Jesus, to hand him over to be murdered. This is a *status confessionis* decision in Judas' life, a decision about the Lordship of Jesus Christ, a decision which Judas failed. Jesus seems to be aware of Judas' plan and he warned Judas of the consequences of following through with it. Yet, even though 'Satan had entered into Judas', as Luke puts it, Jesus did not refuse to wash Judas' feet nor did he exclude Judas from participation at the Lord's Table. And when Judas came into the Garden of Gethsemane to implement his plan with a kiss, Jesus said to him only: 'Friend, do what you are here to do' (Matthew 26:50).

Likewise with Peter. Jesus foresaw Peter's denial of knowing him, of being in communion with him. Three times that night Peter faced *status confessionis* decisions and failed each time. Yet, though Jesus apparently knew this was about to happen, he did not refuse to wash Peter's feet. He did not refuse Peter communion at the last supper.

In other words, shortly after Jesus prays that his disciples may become completely one so that the world may believe, Judas betrays him and Peter denies him. Jesus sees what is coming but washes their feet and does not break communion with them.

In MWC's *Shared Convictions* statement (#2), we say that "through his life and teachings, his cross and resurrection, Jesus showed us how to be faithful disciples (...)." Do we ever see Jesus take the initiative to break communion? If not, can following Jesus ever lead us to take the initiative to break communion? And if communion has been broken by someone else, does 'radical discipleship' not call us to take the initiative to revive it, even if that can only be done in some unknown future and in some way yet to be determined?

Is that not how Jesus advised dealing with communion when others end it?

The Restoration of Communion

Anabaptists referred to an important teaching of Jesus as the 'Rule of Christ'. We find this practice described in Matthew 18, one of only two places in the New Testament where Jesus uses the word *ecclesia* – 'church'. In this instance, Jesus is outlining a process of which one objective is to restore communion in the church if ever it has been broken by someone else.

Ever since I was taught about this Anabaptist conviction, I have thought of verses 15-20 – the verses about disciplining a member of the church who sins – as the 'Rule of Christ': "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault (...) if the member refuses to listen (to you and) even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

But Jesus' teaching in this 'resourcing session' with his disciples did not begin or end with verses 15-20. The 'Rule' which Jesus taught began before verses 15-20 with a call for self-examination on the part every disciple: "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. (...) woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes (...)" (Matthew 18:6-8).

And after verses 15-20, Jesus' teaching continues with a call to pursue ceaselessly the restoration of communion where it has been broken by someone else: "Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven'" (Matthew 18:21-22).

The local Mennonite church where I now live includes a conflict resolution process in its constitution. If a conflict in the church cannot be resolved, the very last step in the process is for the congregation to declare the matter 'unresolvable' and to consider withdrawing the offending member's membership. As I mentioned earlier, the MWC constitution contains no such 'ex-communication' clause! I believe that is a good thing! But I wonder if in some future authoritative text MWC might explicitly commit itself to repeatedly seek renewed conversation and restored communion with any member who has decided to leave, who has taken the initiative to end communion. After all, according to Jesus, the offer of communion should never be withdrawn. "How many times should I forgive," Peter asks, "as many as seven times?" Jesus answers: "Not seven times, but seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:21-22).

Conclusion

God's wisdom, insight, and plan – which, according to Paul, was so long a 'mystery' – is that *all* things on earth and *all* things in heaven, will be gathered up in Christ. May we in MWC be instruments contributing to the unfolding of this divine plan rather than stumbling blocks impeding its fulfillment.