

“Unity, Oneness and Community: National MWC Leaders Respond”

The following report describes the responses of 33 Mennonite World Conference national delegates to a questionnaire in early 2022. This questionnaire was part of Larry Miller’s assignment to speak to the MWC national delegates in Indonesia in 2022. The questions in the survey were designed collaboratively by Larry Miller (retired General Secretary of MWC), Cesar Garcia (current General Secretary of MWC), and Conrad L. Kanagy (Professor of Sociology, Elizabethtown College). In addition, an initial questionnaire was field-tested among a group of delegates before completing the final draft. Besides reporting summary findings, this document will offer suggestions for how delegates’ responses might be utilized beyond this report and the initial presentation to MWC delegates.

Of the 30 delegates responding, three did so in French, eight in Spanish and twenty-one in English.

Twenty respondents had been leaders in their local congregation for sixteen years or more. Eleven had been leaders in their national church for the same time, but only two had been national delegates to MWC for sixteen years or more. In fact, eleven had served globally for five or fewer years. Individuals are more likely to be leaders in the congregation and national church for a lengthy period before becoming leaders in MWC.

The second question had to do with what degree to which the words unity, oneness and communion are similar descriptors of the same spiritual reality. Open-ended responses varied from respondents whose church had never talked about it to a sense that oneness leaves more space for diversity than unity. In general, respondents saw these three descriptors as similar. This may be a place for more significant conversation among MWC delegates, as it is arguable that these are different terms. The lack of differentiation among respondents may reflect the need for more profound teaching about the mandate for oneness that Jesus prays in John 17. This is one place, among others, that points to the value that could be experienced by developing a study for MWC leaders and churches on the topic of unity, communion and oneness.

Leaders also described the characteristics, qualities, charisms, experience, vision and convictions that they consider most important for cultivating communion, oneness and unity within the church. Respondents appeared eager to answer this question and thought deeply about it. Qualities that rose to the top were sensitivity to the Holy Spirit and the Spirit’s guidance. Communicating effectively, exhibiting humility toward one another and listening were often emphasized. Love for God and one another and integrity also received numerous mentions. Others included patience, empathy, forgiveness, valuing others in their diversity, sacrifice, creating and organizing projects together and appreciating the gifts of others. The engagement of leaders around this question suggests that it is pretty important to them. Again, the energy here offers the possibility and value of being more intentional in a study that considers a “theology of unity, oneness and communion,” for as later results will show, this energy for oneness is not necessarily matched by a commitment to the practice of oneness. The gap between prescription and description is relatively wide.

This gap immediately shows up in the following survey question asking leaders to describe the corporate behaviors, practices, or rituals important in strengthening communion, oneness and unity? What was revealing about this question and the responses were the difficulty folks had in defining specific behaviors, practices, or rituals. They tended to want to stay with values such as empathy, openness, respectfulness, trust, a sense of urgency and responsibility. Respondents repeatedly noted that prayer and spiritual discernment were necessary, as was relationship building, sharing the Lord’s Table, spending time together, seminars and retreats and eating together. These are significant rituals,

and all of them help to build community. But all four are relatively general kinds of things that churches regularly practice but do not necessarily experience oneness, unity, or communion.

In a fifth question, respondents were asked whether or not their local or national church bodies have documents that describe specific roles or behaviours or qualifications related to leadership that cultivates communion, oneness, or unity in the church. Five respondents stated that their local church has documents, seventeen said their national body has such documents, and only two stated that MWC has such documents.

In a follow-up question, respondents were asked what characteristics or qualities of a leader their local, national, or global church considers to be most important for those called to lead. A quality that came up often was integrity. Character, commitment to Jesus, aptitude for working on a team, respect, knowing the Word of God and knowing how to lead in complex situations were noted. Still, there was not much overlap or repetition of qualities. It seems to me that there is substantial work to be done on this question and on clarifying exactly what kind of characteristics or qualities a spiritual leader needs. Are these different from those required by leaders in other contexts? What qualities are necessary for a posture of spiritual discernment where leaders recognize that Christ is present in their midst? And then do they submit to the discernment of the group? I see very little in these responses that suggests an awareness or knowledge that when leaders gather around the table together, they are the church discerning what God has already decided or discerned in heaven and their primary responsibility is to listen. Again, this area seems like one that needs additional attention and development for leaders.

A seventh question addressed the ability or capacity to cultivate communion, oneness, or unity within the church and how important this was to the three levels of church – local, national and global. Thirteen respondents replied that this was very important or extremely important in the local church, nineteen in the national church and nine in the global church. Interestingly, it is perceived that the national church values the capacity of a leader to cultivate communion, oneness, or unity more so than does the local church and much more so than does MWC. This finding suggests that if leaders are chosen for MWC based on qualities other than their capacity to cultivate communion, oneness, or unity, it could be challenging for MWC to develop oneness, unity and communion. Mennonite World Conference may want to revisit how people are called from the national church to MWC.

Relatedly, leaders were asked how important it is to their local, national, or global church that a leader illustrates or shows that they practice and behave in ways that cultivate communion, oneness, or unity within the church as part of their calling. Eleven said it is very or extremely important in the local church, nineteen in the national church and nine in MWC (MWC). The difference between these levels of church is interesting – why do delegates place so much emphasis on the national church's unity? Is this because they are representing that level of the church? Is the place where conflicts are currently most intense? What are the consequences they may fear if unity fails the national level?

A ninth question asked leaders about the process of spiritual discernment when addressing what the Spirit is saying about a potentially divisive issue and the most essential leadership qualities for bringing about communion, oneness and unity in this context. These answers are really very impressive when it comes to the kind of posture that I was talking about earlier of listening to one another, of a spiritual discernment process where our discernment is centered in Christ. These responses should be very encouraging to Mennonite World Conference leaders and include a posture of willing surrender to God, a commitment to the spiritual practices of solitude, listening, silence, conciliatory dialogue, discernment through the Holy Spirit, give emphasis to John 17, scripture, prayer and self-examination and the prayer for indifference to everything except the will of God. Respondents noted the need to lead a situation and not manage it and one indicated that discernment is not of individuals but of a group of leaders.

Respondents identified collegial attitudes, equality in communication, listening with openness, taking more time to prayerfully facilitate, making sure each voice is heard and ensuring that everyone can be certain that they are understood. As I read these responses, they struck me as the ones needed for spiritual discernment.

However, I did not hear as much of the recognition that Christ is in the center of discernment and that the discernment happens around the scripture – around the text. The Spanish-speaking responses did emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit (in fact, six of eight respondents mentioned the Holy Spirit). So it sounds to me like the qualities of the individuals are recognized as necessary, but perhaps not as much the presence of God in this space – though again, there is the exception of the responses from the Spanish speakers. So that would be a question that I would have about these responses – where is this recognized as God's space? How is it illustrated as God's space? For we are dependent upon the Spirit of God to be able to come to a place of indifference and trust. This may be another place for teaching.

In question 10, respondents suggested the attitudes, values and actions they have found most important for facilitating communion, oneness and unity in the church while seeking obedience to Christ. Responses included surrender, self-examination, leadership training to build peace, unconditional love, proactive dialogue, preference for the marginalized, connection with God, humility, relationships and empathy. Others included being aware of how people are doing, tolerance, curiosity, patience, teachability, valuing each presence, moving slowly, obedience to the Word and understanding that others may differ from me but are also children of God. Again, when it comes to Mennonite World Conference leaders, they recognize the attitudes, values and actions that are most important in leading toward communion, oneness and unity. In many ways, these leaders have what is needed already and the leadership of MWC can perhaps affirm and identify the wisdom that's already found within this group that needs to be highlighted. Could you create a document or teaching tool that describes what the leaders said about the qualities they believe are essential? This would be held up as not a prescription that someone hands to them, but rather a description of what they have said are the essential qualities.

Leaders were asked to share an experience where they experienced oneness, communion and unity amid a divisive issue. Leaders talked about troubling situations they encountered but less about how they came to unity or communion in encountering those situations. Instead, they highlighted examples of difficult people being replaced and character problems where individuals were asked to leave. People didn't accept others who were baptized in different denominations and barriers such as social status and various types of family and educational levels. Sometimes unity came only after difficult folks died. But respondents did offer some very interesting situations that could readily be created as role-playing scenarios for MWC leaders to practice building unity, oneness and communion. And there were several examples of creative solutions and successes that congregations experienced amid conflicts.

This question illustrates that there are no easy answers to these problems that we encounter. Individuals took a lot of time to address the question, exhibiting honesty and openness. Again, I think some of these could be used as scenarios to apply the values they discussed earlier in questions like 9, 10 and 11.

A different question (12) inquired about the characteristics of leaders' actions and attitudes that limit communion, oneness and unity instead of leading to conflict. Responses included: failure to study a problem, lack of communication and relationship, tone of voice, refusal to listen, stubbornness, pride and inflexibility, wrong assumptions, group thinking and lack of sympathy. Pride, impatience, selfishness, ambition, lacking transparency, rigidity, uninformed opinions and low opinions of others were also noted. Others included speaking rather than listening, lack of transparency, abuse of power,

incompetence, tribalism, disproportionate power, uncontrolled emotions, quarrelsome spirit, lobbying that happens outside of spiritual discernment and behind the back of an open conversation in which one seeks to build majorities and ascribe to the other party certain motives. Dictatorial leadership, lack of availability, knowledge, self-centeredness, lack of diversity, acting dismissively, proudly holding to one answer, unwillingness to forgive, hidden agendas and more were described.

These destructive qualities are the flipside of the qualities that MWC leaders so readily and clearly define as necessary for unity. The specificity of the negative attributes of leadership suggests that these leaders are grounded in and familiar with conflict, tension and division in their church contexts. These answers are not offered in the abstract but obviously within and out of pain. My observation is that these are mature leaders' responses grounded in lived realities.

However, the answers are primarily at the individual rather than the organizational, cultural, social, or spiritual levels. Do leaders recognize the broader corporate and spiritual contexts that lead to division and conflict? Should this be a place for further teaching?

Question 13 asked how the discernment and calling of leaders have changed over time and whether these changes have been helpful or not in building communion, oneness and unity in the church. Responses suggest that the calling of leaders has become more challenging rather than less challenging, made so by a movement toward pastoral searches, hiring and firing pastors and the professionalization of the ministry. Respondents noted the decline in the number of individuals who really want to be in ministry because of the world's complexity. Individuality is making it difficult and the calling is no longer attractive to young people. Others did note that their processes have improved through better training, adherence to scripture, good working relationships,

We were curious about the scriptures that have formed how MWC leaders understand the cultivation of unity, oneness and communion in the church. Many passages emerged, suggesting that leaders have a biblical grounding in their theology of leadership. The following are among those identified, some several times: Ephesians 2 and 4, I Corinthians 12, Romans 12, I Corinthians 11:23, Revelation 13, Hebrews 5, Philippians 2, I Peter 1:15, John 9, Acts 2:41 and the entire chapter, Psalm 133, I Peter 3:15, Romans 12:3, I Timothy 3, Titus 1, James 3, the Sermon the Mount, Ephesians 4:1-16 and John 17. The diversity of passages again suggests that leaders have taken the Bible seriously as they consider their role in church leadership. These texts ought to be brought together to add a scripture or a biblical mandate to how unity, oneness and communion are promoted in MWC.

As we think about what we might do with these materials, I think one possibility is to list what the leaders describe as essential qualities for unity, oneness and communion and utilize these in several role-playing scenarios that they also described. This could be a study of the scriptures that they identify as essential for their life together. So we could create a Bible study of unity, oneness and communion that connects to the qualities that the leaders described and then give them a chance to practice these in role-playing. The point is to reinforce the biblical mandate for unity but the deep challenges of living it together.

Nearing the end of the survey, we asked about the appropriate place of power or authority in church leadership. How can authority and power impede or limit unity and oneness? There was no clarity about the role of authority and power in the church and among leaders. Some see it as something not to be given much attention to. Others see it as being significantly important in leadership. Others posited power and authority against service and humility. Others see it as residing in the congregation or community and not within one individual. Power was seen as divisive by some but essential and inescapable by others. But again, the Spanish speakers in the survey were much more upbeat about

power and authority and the necessity of these in the church, but that it lies in the community, or is shared, comes from God, is for service and should be used in accordance with Matthew 20:24-28. Power and authority, by and large among the Spanish-speaking respondents, are recognized as being present in the church, can be used for the good of the church and can also be used in manipulative and authoritarian ways.

The set of answers to this question of authority suggests a need for a more significant study of church authority because, without a shared understanding of where authority lies in a system and agreement about how it is used, there can be little movement toward unity or the fulfillment of an organization's mission. Authority always exists, and if it's not identified, recognized, appreciated, valued and directed, it will emerge in ways that prevent movement and traction in a congregation or an organization. And it's clear that leaders, except for the Spanish-speaking leaders, do not have a shared understanding of the role of authority or what it means.

Question 16 asked about the most conducive context to nurturing unity, oneness and communion. Again, it's clear that the question of how to develop oneness amid crisis is not shared, and it is in this question's responses that we see leaders beginning to stake out their convictions and what they believe and that those convictions and beliefs may not always include unity as the highest value. Some individuals offer relatively strong statements about interpreting the Bible in particular ways rather than recognizing that we have subjective identities with subjective brains that guide our behavior and actions. Up to this point in the questionnaire, unity was given a high value, but here the narrative begins to shift and continues to do so in responses to the next question. On the other hand, the Spanish-speaking leaders exhibited optimism that across the various types of conflicts, it is possible to continue working on unity-building through dialogue, listening, corporate discernment, ensuring that all opinions are heard, separating personal from community interests, having clear goals, practice forgiveness and discern practical solutions that preserve unity.

Respondents were asked how quickly they would consider breaking unity and oneness with their church over a question or issue they disagreed with others to be faithful to their understanding of biblical teaching. Thirteen said not quickly at all, another thirteen said not quickly, four were not sure, two said somewhat quickly, and none said very quickly. These responses suggest that leaders are very supportive of unity in the abstract. But in the following question (#18), when asked if there is ever an appropriate reason for breaking communion unity and oneness, a wide range of answers emerged. It was suggested that doing so reflected Jesus in breaking from the leaders of his day. Other responses included yes, because of deep theological differences that would reorient the church when power is the motivating cause if the teachings of Jesus are abandoned, unbiblical practices and lifestyles, conscious lifestyle choices that disobey God's Word if sin is involved. There's no possibility of repentance and correction of the sinful attitude in the context of violent words and actions, pride, sexual violence, failure to follow Jesus, to identify with Jesus, to support the divinity of Jesus when there is an exploitation of the weak and voiceless when a party is engaged in a persistent sinful activity and unwilling to change and if someone acts in ways that are not of Christ. The Apostle Paul is held up as a leader who breaks with other leaders at a specific time, but they eventually see each other again.

Other reasons for breaking unity included a fundamental failure that harms the community and ourselves and relates to our humanity and dignity as persons. One respondent noted that the human being or human strength can only tolerate conflict and discord for so long before finding more peaceful places to worship.

So indeed, respondents do believe that there are times when division trumps unity, oneness and communion. Such other times were identified as cases when Jesus is no longer considered Lord and

when diverse values and purpose take parties in different directions, failure to pursue the mission of God, leaders not wanting to follow the Holy Spirit, when one's integrity is assaulted or attacked, other direction or different points of view, the intentional exercising of clear sin such as violence, sexual violence, non-cooperation, going against the teaching of Jesus, when the Bible is not used as a reference point, and when Jesus is removed from the center of our commitments. Others noted that breaking unity over different views of same-sex relationships is appropriate.

So yes, I would say there is again a certain willingness to break based on behaviors of others, violence, lack of integrity, conflict based on differences in views of the Bible, harming one another based on deception, the reinterpretation of scripture and acceptance for morality when Jesus is removed from the center.

There appears to be a bifurcation that runs right through the heart of MWC where there is this commitment to unity and why unity is essential and what unity looks like, but then some particular areas where unity, oneness and communion can be broken and even must be broken.

We also asked how one reconciles a decision to break unity, communion and oneness in light of Jesus's prayer for oneness and unity in John 17. It was clear that leaders don't know how to reconcile Jesus's prayer with the reality of broken communion and theologically believe that unity cannot be broken nor should it be broken. And yet, for some situations and in some cases, they believe breaking communion is necessary. This perhaps is the place of greatest discomfort, cognitive dissonance and uncertainty for delegates.

There was no difference at the church level in identifying unity as more or less relevant (Question 21). There were few meaningful suggestions for how MWC can strengthen unity, oneness and communion through symbols, rituals, or liturgies.

The final question, which asked whether there was anything else they would like to say to the leadership at MWC, included gratitude for focusing on unity within the church and for the opportunity to evaluate leadership. The question was raised whether MWC could provide a workshop based on communion, oneness and unity. Others said, "Thank you for the survey. It's an important and encouraging process. You're taking steps toward unity and listening to many voices. I see that you take great care of valued local forms of the church and bring the light what they can contribute to the fullness of Christ."

Some responses from French and Spanish-speaking leaders were more guarded and less magnanimous toward MWC, concerned that MWC is paying more attention to some voices than others, working harder at establishing "working conditions that will allow them to truly understand the causes that threaten these values...as opposed to deciding based on the information given by servants with little credibility." Still, among the French and Spanish speakers, a majority expressed grace and gratitude toward MWC.

In conclusion, on the biblical and theological side, leaders affirmed the need for unity, absent specific problems and specific situations of division. But when they talked about whether there was ever a time for disunity or time for breaking up the communion, they were relatively quick to say yes and justify why this was the case.

At the same time, I was struck by the difficulty leaders in this arena know their particular roles as national delegates. Who are they working on behalf of—the national church or MWC as a whole. Who do they represent at the MWC table? What plan does each bring and who sets that agenda? Is it possible for MWC to frame a table of spiritual discernment that socializes leaders to bracket their particular church's concerns or theological position to hear one another? Is it possible to construct the

MWC table as a classroom, a learning space – as opposed to a space where right and wrong, truth and error, heresy, or orthodoxy are at stake, thus raising the bar and creating defensiveness before the conversation even begins? How might MWC become, above all, a learning community with Jesus as the Rabbi/Teacher?

The following quotes are from respondents and reflect qualities, attitudes and values that strengthen oneness, unity and communion and represent the posture necessary to step back from one's own framing of beliefs in order to understand those of others and to move the community toward unity and oneness:

I think various social inequalities play a significant role...Unity can arise when we recognize, address and change inequalities. Inequalities such as economic background, gender and race play an important role. If we want to discuss issues and maintain our unity, we need to clarify people's different roles and power relationships.

I think we should continue to ask [about our experience and understanding of leadership, which helps to nurture or limit oneness, communion and unity] in the future of MWC's meetings. How can we continue to let every community member have an opportunity to participate and share their gift of leadership authentically and uniquely that can allow everyone who has a call, capability and commitment from the local, national and global?

Of course, we always need to form the dialogue with a Biblical perspective as well, how to contextualize leadership that can embrace all differences, bring harmony, shalom to all peoples? I will call it leadership from below.

We need to remind ourselves that no one person fully understands the mind of God. Nor does anyone person perfectly understand how scripture should be interpreted. History, context and training all play a role. Humility is crucial.

Shaking hands, looking each other in the eyes. Celebrating the good things in life, expressions of 'I am thankful that you are here, I learn from you.' Expressions of how and where we are limited in our knowledge and entrust ourselves to God and His Spirit to open our eyes.

There is a basic trust, common understanding what it means to live together, our commitment to God, to the church and to each other. Knowing our strengths, our weaknesses, our gifts, our vulnerability and the willingness to open ourselves to each other, our lives would be richer, stronger, more meaningful when we are together. The "Ubuntu" principle 'I am because we are' is important to me.

Decide together. Make spaces to share needs, concerns, achievements, joys, celebrations. Dream and make family and community plans together, share and apply successful local, regional and national successes related to the topic.

In general, these responses were the exception to the rule compared to many others where lists of qualities, characteristics, beliefs, actions, etc., were offered, but relatively little contextualization of those qualities, characteristics, or beliefs or actions.

Conrad KANAGY, 8 May 2020