

## How is Mennonite Church USA doing in our desire to be a peace church?

Response to a query from the Peace Commission  
of Mennonite World Conference<sup>1</sup>  
January 2011



### **A sampling of quotes:**

We talk about our peace 'heritage,' or our peace 'position.' Too often peace becomes a static thing to hold onto as opposed to a discipline that has to be practiced, even if imperfectly.

--an area conference peace representative

Our peace work centers in small clusters of passionate people who aren't always deeply rooted in the fabric of congregational life.

--an area conference peace representative

A lot of energy for peace and justice comes from people in the church who did not grow up Mennonite.

--West Coast Mennonite pastor

Twenty-one percent [of members of Mennonite Church USA] would enter the military if faced with a draft and another 10% are unsure what they would do. . . . Ninety-three percent of members [of Mennonite Church USA] believe that 'peacemaking is a central theme of the gospel.'

--*Road Signs for the Journey: A Profile of Mennonite Church USA*, by Conrad Kanagy, p. 127-8

### **A variety of snapshots:**

- A men's group from Infinity Mennonite Church in Harlem (New York City) leads a morning prayer walk each week. Since they started, no one has died from gun violence in their neighborhood.
- More than fifteen households from Mennonite congregations in Harrisonburg, Virginia pay a voluntary tax on their gasoline consumption. They pool this money and use it to support peace and environmental causes. This effort has inspired similar groups in Indiana and California.
- Lawrence Hart, Cheyenne peace chief and Mennonite pastor, leads in the effort to repatriate and bury with dignity the remains of Native American people.
- The decision by Goshen College to play the U.S. national anthem at sporting events in order to be hospitable to non-Mennonite students and visitors has generated strong responses and ongoing conversation.
- When a young man who had grown up in a Mennonite congregation in Indiana decided to enlist in the Army, the congregation told him: We have a lot more to say, but one thing we want to tell you is: Don't kill anybody. We love you and we will pray for you.
- When President Obama sent 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, the Albuquerque Mennonite Church took out an ad in the local newspaper with the headline: The nation whose God is war will know no peace.

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<sup>1</sup>Our response to the MWC query was largely drafted by André Gingerich Stoner, Director of Holistic Witness for Mennonite Church USA. To help prepare, we invited peace representatives in our 21 area conferences to conduct listening sessions with people in their area and then gather their responses. The initial draft was shared and tested with a wider circle of pastors, teachers, denominational leaders, practitioners and others before being submitted. We are grateful for the many responses and suggestions that helped shaped this statement.

- In recent years, several congregations have joined Mennonite Church USA conferences as a whole congregation because they are drawn to church which worships a peacemaking and enemy-loving Jesus.
- Philadelphia area Mennonites helped form a large ecumenical coalition to challenge and shut-down a large gun shop which refused to sign a code of conduct to prevent guns from reaching the streets illegally;
- A Florida congregation lost more than 100 members because of fear of immigration raids and loss of construction jobs. Many returned to their families in Guatemala and Mexico. The congregation seeks to minister to them and their families while the broader church struggles to know how to respond to challenges faced by our immigrant brothers and sisters.
- Mennonites in Kansas have worked with others for several years to abolish the death penalty in that state.

### **Our context:**

There is much to be grateful for about life in the United States. Though imperfect, we are thankful for traditions of participatory democracy, the protection of civil liberties and freedom of religion, the rule of law and practices of governmental accountability, and the economic opportunity that many enjoy. Many Mennonites have thrived in this setting – economically, culturally and institutionally.

This has not been the experience of all, however. The decimation of Native communities and the bitter legacy of slavery continue to haunt our nation. Today many recent immigrants are forced to live in the shadows, even as they provide indispensable labor for our society. Further, over the past 25 years our nation has experienced a dramatic increase in inequality of both income and wealth, with one in five children living in poverty.

We must also acknowledge that our nation has the largest and most powerful military in the history of the world. A worldwide network of U.S. military bases and massive military spending protects our way of life and helps maintain extreme global inequality. Two ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have taken the lives of tens and tens of thousands of people. We might be tempted to conclude that this arrangement, however flawed and broken, is better than conceivable alternatives and thus deserving of our tacit support. Yet we know how the Bible speaks of empires and we recognize how self-serving it is to assume the U.S. empire is different from all those that preceded it.

We are disoriented and confused by recent events that have impacted our communities: the 9/11 attacks, the collapse of huge companies and near collapse of our entire financial system, high levels of unemployment, the erosion of middle class living standards, a growing preoccupation with “homeland security” and the continuous waging of war. Our unease is intensified by signs that our culture is in many ways a culture of violence. Deeply disturbing statistics about gun violence, abortion, sexual assault and exploitation, and media violence could readily be cited.

### **How is Mennonite Church USA doing in our desire to be a peace church?**

At the outset it must be said that there is **wide diversity** among our congregations and members as to how we understand what it means to be a peace church and how we live that out. We also **need to speak with a great deal of humility**. We are aware of how limited we are in our witness to the life-transforming and world-changing gospel of peace. Nonetheless, **we rejoice with gratitude** for the times and places when God’s grace has broken through and empowered sisters and brothers among us – past and present – to offer a word of truth or a deed of courage and where God’s Spirit has led the church to live, even if in small ways, as a colony of heaven in the midst of this society.

As Christians in the U.S. context, we are **subject to extremely powerful cultural forces of affluence, frantic busyness, and radical individualism**. These hamper us in our striving for God's kingdom. Our affluence dulls us to the pain of those around us and leads us to protect and justify our way of life. Our busyness keeps us from developing deep spiritual roots which can carry courageous peacemaking. Our individualism prevents us from forming communities of mutual support and accountability that can resist the pressures of the culture.

When we are prepared to listen, **brothers and sisters in our global family of faith can help us** see more clearly our own cultural context and how it shapes and forms us. They can embolden and inspire us to worship and follow Jesus in this place.

*As we ponder the question of how we are doing at being a peace church, we become aware of a number of areas where we see hope and promise, as well as related questions and concerns:*

1. We are encouraged that our **church leaders and institutions to a large degree embrace the language and calling of peace**. Examples we might cite include: peacemaking and justice concerns included in the core value and priority statements of the church, the development of peace studies programs at colleges and seminaries, an old established area conference highlighting peace witness in the program booklet celebrating its anniversary, the founding and support of Christian Peacemaker Teams, conference web-sites which often include peace resources, frequent articles on topics related to the gospel of peace in our church periodical *The Mennonite* and books on peace themes from our publishing house.

We are concerned, however, that . . .

- there is a gap between denominational and agency leaders, academics, activists, and some urban congregations on the one hand, and members in many congregations on the other, in how we think and talk about our calling to peacemaking and how it relates to our faith;
- at times, the embrace of peace seems to be a matter of language and branding. We are concerned that our peace witness should arise from a deeply rooted identity with Jesus, rather than from changing waves of an unreliable and popular secular interest in peace.
- in some conferences because of restructuring and limited finances, peace and mission committees have been disbanded and there is no volunteer or staff person tending these concerns;
- our peace work often centers in small clusters of passionate people who aren't always deeply rooted in the fabric of congregational life.

2. We note with appreciation that in past decades we have **deepened our Biblical and theological understandings that undergird our peace witness**. Our commitment to Christian peacemaking is not based simply on a few verses, but is rooted in the teaching, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Increasingly, for example, Mennonite peacemakers see the cross as the ultimate expression of how God rights wrong, overcomes sin and evil, and loves even enemies. Increasingly, we also see peace as not just the absence of violence, but by necessity encompassing justice understood as right relationship. Mennonite Bible scholars and theologians of past decades have made remarkable contributions, both within and beyond the Mennonite world, in articulating and deepening understanding of the gospel of peace.

We are concerned, however, that . . .

- many of our members' theology is shaped more by Christian radio and secular talk shows than by the curriculum from our publishing house;
- too often peace is disconnected from other aspects of what it means to be an Anabaptist Christian. When you ask some members what it means to be Mennonite, they might say: It's

like being an evangelical plus peace. When you ask others, they might say: It's like being a mainline Protestant plus peace. In this way, peace has again become an "add-on," even if a valued one, rather than one important part of a whole web of commitments of what it means to live in communities which are formed in the image of Jesus;

- at times, the ethics of peacemaking is accentuated in ways that disconnect it from a life of faith which is rooted and grounded in the love of God as made known through Jesus;
- some among us tend to emphasize God's forgiveness and gracious gifts of love, while others emphasize following Jesus and living out his teachings. Too often, still, grace and discipleship are not deeply integrated in our teaching, preaching and living.

3. We are encouraged that in our **transition from farm to town to city**, we are building relationships with our neighbors, sharing our faith and **engaging in mission** where we live and work.

We note that as we are more culturally engaged, our congregations have taken very different approaches. Some have highlighted peace and justice commitments as a central part of proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom and attracting newcomers. There are numerous examples of people who have joined our congregations, precisely because of teaching and practice rooted in the gospel of peace. At the same time other congregations have minimized the peace witness, also in the hopes of being more attractive to newcomers. Some have suggested that the events of 9/11 resulted in a silencing of our church on peacemaking in some settings. Some members report hearing very few "peace sermons" in their congregations and sometimes newer members are surprised when in a crisis moment, they first hear about Mennonite peace convictions.

We also note that as congregations walk with real people in difficult circumstances, they are often less legalistic than they might have been several generations ago. We live with more shades of grey than we used to. Many of our congregations are now less likely to expel a youth who grew up in the church and then enlisted in the military. This doesn't necessarily mean our convictions are less deep, but it requires careful ongoing tending and articulation of our core commitments.

4. We are gratified that our **peace witness is not just a matter of saying "no" to physical violence but also saying "yes!" to the fullness of life God wants for us**. It includes a wide variety of constructive and positive initiatives. Our peacemaking thus includes mediation, victim offender reconciliation, domestic violence prevention, healing for victims of abuse, work for racial justice, and much more. Working for peace with all creation is also increasingly understood as part of our peace witness.

We are concerned, however, that . . .

- for some of our congregations and members, "peace" is still primarily a matter of not going to war. In a time when there is no draft, engagement in peace witness wanes.
- even though there is no formal draft, our young men and women especially in racial/ethnic communities face the strong pressures of an economic draft and we have not found ways to be in solidarity with them financially and otherwise to help them say "no."
- our tax monies are conscripted and each year our church members pay for cruise missiles, smart bombs, and unmanned drones, with barely the slightest tinge of conscience let alone whimper of protest.

We recall the powerful faith-forming role that alternative service played in our church (whether through Civilian Public Service, I-W, or international service programs), and we wonder what might be the comparable experiences today .

We also note that although we have well developed peace theology and practice . . .

- we have a very underdeveloped theology and understanding of justice/ right relationship, especially in economic areas such as fair wages, the rights of workers to organize and inequality in income and wealth;
- we are challenged to develop a theology and practice of hospitality to the stranger, to know how to stand in solidarity with immigrant sisters and brothers and to be witnesses for justice in a time of increasing hostility and punitive measures directed toward immigrants.
- we have only begun to ponder how our context as citizens of empire requires fresh thinking about our peace witness and about how we fashion our lives as alternative communities that speak to the events of our times and offer truthfulness and hope to those who are discouraged and disillusioned.

5. We note that over the past decades some parts of our church have **moved from a nonresistant quietism to what might be described as nonviolent activism**. This resulted from an awareness that whether we like it or not, we are enmeshed in systems of violence, that in a democratic system we share responsibility for the actions of our government, and that we must actively seek to stand with victims and work for justice. This witness is often most compelling and powerful when it is rooted in relationships with those who suffer injustice and violence.

We are concerned, however, that . . .

- as we seek to be advocates, we are sometimes in danger of embracing the notion that what is really important is changing government. We sometimes place more hope in government than we do in the church as the place where God’s “new thing” breaks into the world;
- as we become more engaged in the political arena we have developed stronger commitments to political parties which can undermine our shared loyalty to Jesus. Some parts of the church would perceive the language and focus of much of our peace witness to be too closely allied with a liberal political agenda;
- perhaps for fear of appearing partisan, it is difficult as a church to speak the truth about specific acts and forms of violence, especially those that reveal deceit and malevolence, preferring instead statements of general principle;
- some among us continue to hold a strict two-kingdom conviction that we should not engage in political advocacy of any kind.

6. We are strengthened in our own peace convictions and witness by **others in the broader body of Christ who encourage us not to give up our gospel treasures**, but who also challenge us to be more courageous and faithful witnesses.

We are concerned, however, that . . .

- at the same time, we face the challenge of dealing creatively and in a Christ-like manner with the differences among us, whether they are different perspectives on volatile issues, or differences of race and economic status.

## **Affirmation of Faith and a Prayer**

As we reflect on how we are doing at being a peace church we affirm again that as the church of Jesus Christ we are called to proclaim the gospel of peace, to be about the work of healing and hope, and to live as communities of grace, joy and peace. The church shares the message of reconciliation not just by what it says, or even by what it does, but also by what it is. The church of Jesus Christ is a peace church. This is both a gift and a calling.

Together we testify that the grace and love of God has power to continue to transform us and our world. God's own Holy Spirit alone can help us move through our fears which so often immobilize us or keep us entrenched in old ways of thinking and being. Jesus is the One who poured out his life in love for us while we were weak, while we were yet sinners, even as we were God's enemies. It is only as we enter more deeply into relationship with Jesus the Christ that we can hope to speak and act faithfully and effectively in a world racked by the horror, pain and suffering of injustice, violence and war. Our peacemaking involves putting on the mind of Christ and being led by the Spirit – apart from this, it is impossible.

We pray for an outpouring of God's Spirit on us and our sisters and brothers around the globe so that together we might be open to the new thing God wants to do in us and through us in pursuing our calling to be a living peace church.