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Conférence Mennonite Mondiale • Mennonite World Conference • Congreso Mundial Menonita

4 *USA & Congo*
Mennonite churches
in dialogue:

**What does it
mean to share
our gifts?**

8 *The Paraguay Chaco:*
**Where ethnic
groups are
learning to live
together**

11 *Redefining martyrs:*
**Toward a
common cloud
of witnesses**

13 *MWC letter:*
**Zimbabwe crisis
needs immediate
high level action**

14 *MWC officers & staff:*
**Plans in works
for koinonia
delegations,
global deacons**



2 *Täuferjahr:*
Celebrating Anabaptism in Switzerland



Combined Mennonite and Reformed choirs perform in Langnau at ceremonies initiating *Täuferjahr*, a celebration of the influence of Anabaptism in Switzerland.

Swiss remember Anabaptists in year of special events

Langnau, Switzerland—“We can’t undo what was done, but society can learn so that the mistakes are not repeated.”

With those words, Werner Luginbühl, president of the government of the canton of the Emmental, opened a service here on March 24 marking the beginning of *Täuferjahr*, a year commemorating the beginning and presence of Anabaptists in this country.

It was in this part of Switzerland that authorities brutally repressed the Anabaptists, who challenged the 16th century reforms of Martin Luther and one of the Swiss leaders of the Reformation, Ulrich Zwingli.

“We, as the indirect successors to the political authorities of that time, regret the injustices done to so many and the suffering caused,” Luginbühl said.

Official reconciliation between Switzerland’s Protestant and Mennonite churches happened in the 1970s, but Anabaptist history has remained a “taboo subject,” according to Fritz von Gunten, principal coordinator of the commemorative events.

“We’d prefer to talk about success and positive aspects of the past rather than dark chapters,” said von Gunten. “There are Anabaptists living in the Emmental today who are well integrated into their communities, [but] the population knows very little about their history.”

Von Gunten said he has been overwhelmed by the number of projects submitted for inclusion in the official program designed to raise awareness of

the past. More than 200 events will recall the persecution of Anabaptists, divided mainly into Mennonites and Amish today. This persecution began during the Reformation and did not end until the early 19th century.

The *Täuferjahr* events include plays, exhibitions, and excursions throughout Bern and neighbouring cantons in northwestern Switzerland.

The country’s existing Anabaptist community is uneasy about suddenly finding itself in the spotlight, Paul Gerber, president of the Swiss Mennonite Conference, said at the service. The challenge for Mennonites today is to remain true to their faith despite this new attention.

Gerber reminded the audience that, while Anabaptists no longer suffer because of their beliefs, people are still being persecuted in Switzerland. His statement was a veiled reference to the fate of asylum seekers who are not burned nor drowned like the Anabaptists of the 16th century but are often rejected by authorities.

Swiss Mennonites today have 14 congregations with about 2,500 members.

Visitors from abroad are encouraged to attend an international gathering in the Emmental from July 26-29, 2007. More information is available at www.anabaptism.org (organisers of the year of the Anabaptists).

—Dale Bechtel of *swissinfo* of the Swiss Broadcasting Company.

Täuferjahr: celebrating

Dialoguing

by Markus Rediger

The Emmental. This region of Switzerland is home to cheese with the same name. It is also here that the oldest Anabaptist church in the world is found.

Followers of Jesus Christ of the Anabaptist persuasion have met here since 1527. Here, for more than 300 years they were suppressed, persecuted, and then scattered.

But it is also here, in the Emmental, that *Täuferjahr* will be staged in 2007. More than 200 events celebrating the beginnings and presence of Anabaptism in Switzerland are on the schedule.

It is amazing what public attention the “year of the Anabaptists” is generating. Newspapers are publishing news and articles about *Täuferjahr*, and bookstores that usually don’t sell Anabaptist books are ordering *Täuferführer der Schweiz*, a guide to Anabaptism (currently published in German with French and English translations in progress).

Anabaptist Year 2007 officially began

*Cover: At this site on the Limmat River in Zurich, Switzerland, Felix Manz and other Anabaptists lost their lives in the 16th century. It was here that reconciliation between the descendants of the persecutors and those persecuted began in 2004, including a service in which MWC general secretary Larry Miller preached in the Grossmünster (background, right). The commemorative plaque in the foreground was also dedicated at that event. Reconciliation continues in 2007 through several events scheduled for *Täuferjahr*, a celebration of Anabaptism in Switzerland.*

photo by Matthias Rediger

Anabaptism in Switzerland

with our former persecutors

with a worship service on March 24, 2007, in the Reformed Church of Langnau [see story at left]. People from across the world are expected to gather June 26-29 for International Days featuring, in addition to a cultural program, opportunities to visit places of Anabaptist interest in the Emmental and the Jura. These days will also feature a large worship service in the Langnau ice arena.

An exhibition, "Baptized and Blessed," on the background of Anabaptism will be on display in Langnau throughout the year. A large mass choir will perform Mennonite concerts in Bern and in Langnau in September. Also on the schedule is a march to make vivid the deportation of Anabaptists in the 16th century. In addition, there will be presentations, displays, theatrical performances, concerts, and excursions in the Emmental throughout the year (schedule at www.menno.ch or www.anabaptism.org).

Numerous events are taking place in other regions that are in effect invitations to reconciliation and dialogue. On the one hand, these come from Reformed pastors, but they are also from cultural people, such as film makers or theater directors.

There are entire congregations, historians, and theologians who have taken up themes from Anabaptist history. When the Reformed Church of Kirchberg celebrated its 500th anniversary

last year, they invited Mennonites to participate in a worship service, to pray together, and to enjoy fellowship with each another.

Marianne Rediger, Mennonite representative, said at this festive event: "The former Anabaptists of Bern are at home today anywhere in the world. Many emigrated under the stress of persecution. They were a people of dispersion. Those who remained here became 'the quiet in the land.' When the persecution abated, and they were gradually tolerated—they were, for example, allowed to settle in the Jura, but only in areas 1000 meters above sea level; many have remained there. Yes, the footloose and the disturbed emigrated; the 'quiet in the land' stayed. That left its mark."

Today, in the Canton of Bern, there are some Reformed Church buildings that were built with money confiscated from expelled Anabaptists in those early years. That is why people like Wilfried Gasser of the Bern high council and a member of the evangelical populist party, are urging that a memorial of some type be erected in various places of historical significance in Bern today.

Even though Zurich is where the Anabaptist movement began in 1525, there is no Mennonite Church in this city. Some Swiss Mennonite Conference leaders have raised the question whether it would not be timely to return to the cradle of Anabaptism and plant a Mennonite Church in Zurich once again. Today, Mennonites who move to the region of Zurich, mostly join other Christian

A young Mennonite (in traditional garb) at the Bluturm (blood-tower) in Bern, Switzerland; 16th century Anabaptists were tortured in towers such as this.

churches. It is time to revive the silent presence of Anabaptists on memorial plaques and home inscriptions of Zurich and to carry the Anabaptist message onto the streets of that city again.

"We have not sought a place in the display window," says Martin Hunziker, pastor of the the Emmental Mennonite Church. But during this year, "we want to be visible to the outside, to contribute to mutual understanding, and to offer a perspective at a time when individualism is prominent."

Swiss Mennonites encourage visitors to *Täuferjahr*, the Anabaptist Year, to also visit Mennonite churches and, in dialogue with them, to search for answers as to how the good news is being lived today and how the mission of the Anabaptists can be realized in today's world.

Markus Rediger, Muensingen-Bern, Switzerland, is a member of the MWC Executive Committee and former president of the Swiss Mennonite Conference.



photo by Markus Rediger

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Church-to-church relationships:

What does it mean to share our gifts?

After more than three years of cautious exploration and joint discernment, two Congolese Mennonite conferences welcomed a 13-member delegation from Mennonite Church USA for a church-to-church relationship visit February 3-13, 2007.

The delegation first spent three days in Kinshasa and then split into three subgroups to visit Kikwit, Tshikapa, and Mbuji Mayi. The pages that follow contain several reports from these visits.

Relationships between the Congo Evangelical Mennonite Church (CEM), the Congo Mennonite Church (CMCo) and Mennonite Church USA began at the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) Assembly 14 in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, in 2003.

Three years later, following a meeting of the MWC General Council in Pasadena, California, USA, two Congolese Mennonites spent time visiting Mennonite Church USA congregations; several others were denied entry visas by the U.S. government.

While in Congo in February 2007, the Mennonite Church USA group also visited with leaders of the third Congolese conference, the Congo Mennonite Brethren Church (CEFMC).

Mennonite Church USA, CMCo, and CEM have many points of historical connections. Both Congolese conferences grew out of the work of the Congo Inland Mission—later known as the Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission. Since the early 1960's, members from all three groups have served together through Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).

"We hope your presence among us will help us redefine what it means to be together and help each other become better churches," said Alphonse Tshiala, a CEM pastor in Kinshasa, when he met the delegation. Also enthusiastically welcoming the group was Pascal Misakabu, past president of CEM and a Congolese leader who worked closely with MWC to begin the church-to-church relationship process.

"We want to learn more about how we can nurture our friendship with you," said Sharon Waltner, moderator-elect of Mennonite Church USA and a member of the delegation. "And we want to learn how to share our gifts with each other."

The reports of the visit that follow were written by:

- Benjamin Mubenga, president, CEM
- Laurent Kamizelo Kianza, general secretary, CMCo
- Alphonse Tshiala, CEM pastor, Kinshasa
- Ron Byler, associate director, Mennonite Church USA

Diamonds are forever

On the road from Mbuji Mayi through the diamond fields, Reverend Benjamin Mubenga was asked by passersby if he was taking his white passengers to see diamonds.

Mubenga, president of the Communauté Evangelique Mennonite (CEM), said he was on his way to visit churches. Later, his passengers—five members of the Mennonite Church USA delegation visiting in Congo, agreed that Mubenga was helping to shape diamonds of a different kind: CEM congregations in the Eastern Kasai province.

On the diamond trail, the delegation, accompanied by CEM church leaders, traveled more than five hours in an SUV over rut-filled, washed-out roads to visit three Congolese congregations near Tshintshianku, just 60 miles outside of Mbuji Mayi. For the group it was first-hand observation that adequate transportation—both appropriate vehicles and adequate roads—is a major obstacle to the growth of CEM churches.

The delegation visited nearly a dozen parishes, often arriving at their intended destination hours later than expected. Church members were waiting to greet them as the vehicle approached through a festive palm-leaf lined arch. Then the members were joyfully escorted to seats of honor at the front of the church. Children, youth, and adults, numbering many more than 100 at each stop, sang of their love for Jesus.

CEM leaders told the visitors that the Christian churches in the community face three basic challenges: poverty, politics, and education. Mubenga said another challenge for CEM is keeping people together in one conference when

Everywhere the Mennonite Church USA delegation went, they received warm welcomes, such as from this group at Mukedi, which included the congregation's oldest pastor (second from left).

photo by Marathana Prothro





Members of the Mennonite Church USA delegation—James Wenger, Suzanne Lind, and Ron Byler (left to right)—join Congolese church leaders for a tour of Evangelical Mennonite Church (CEM) parishes. Fifteen persons traveled in one vehicle over rut-filled dirt roads, often arriving at their destinations hours later than expected. But congregational members were there to greet them.

they speak different languages. Members often need to travel hundreds of kilometers over poor roads to gather. “But when the people get a taste of what it’s like to be together, they want more,” Mubenga said.

Currently 25 evangelists are being trained to start new CEM churches. When the training is completed, each evangelist will receive \$10 and be sent out. The new pastors will need to find their own means of support in their new communities.

Later CEM officers talked about the challenges they face, including serious conflict in the church. These leaders have worked hard to resolve this conflict, with the help of MWC and MCC. None of the leaders receive payment for their denominational work.

CEM administers 60 schools with about 10,000 students. The church receives some payment from the government, but this is far less than needed to run the schools effectively. CEM leaders said they also hope to expand conference office facilities and build a health center, primary and secondary schools, and homes for some of their leaders.

“We were impressed by the determination and commitment of our brothers and sisters who were experiencing such a context for the first time,” Mubenga wrote following the visit. “Indeed, we were wonderfully surprised to see their flexibility and

their ability to adapt to the living conditions here, including the challenges of travel to the interior. ... This shows us that love overcomes all barriers.”

Alphonse Tshiala, president of the CEM churches in Kinshasa, said to the delegates about their visit: “We have much satisfaction and take pride in knowing that God blessed us by helping us to get to know you. Your presence with us was not due to chance. God knows that you needed to be with us so that we could together strengthen the gifts of all.”

On the road back from Luputa to Mbuji Mayi earlier in the week, the 15-member SUV entourage jumped out of the vehicle to visit a diamond merchant who was a member of one of the CEM congregations. He showed them a handful of small, uncut diamonds worth more than \$1,500.

Like these diamonds, leaders agreed, the initial gift sharing efforts between Congo and U.S. churches are small, but the potential can be very valuable.

Not just talking equality

“We were initially struggling with the differences between the two groups,” said Laurent Kamizelo, general secretary for Communauté Mennonite au Congo (CMCo), when the visit of the delegation from Mennonite Church USA began. “But once we were able to enter into exchange and be honest with each other and learn about our strengths and needs, we were able to make progress.”

Joseph Malu-a-Gimena, a pastor and secondary school principal in Mukedi, agreed. “By experiencing each other’s lives as they really are, we’ve begun the process of building this relationship,” he said. “We’re getting to know you better by eating meals with you and worshipping with you.”

The USA group, one of three visiting various areas in Congo, had driven six hours from Kikwit to the former Mukedi mission station. This site is a strong symbol of early relationships between North American and Congolese Mennonites. It is home to multiple vibrant CMCo congregations and has a hospital, health center, schools, and old missionary homes.

Yet Mukedi is cut off from the rest of Congo and CMCo. There are no paved roads. There is no electricity (except that produced by a generator)

At Lozo Munene, a 12-year-old boy offered the Mennonite Church USA delegation 500 Congolese francs (about \$1 US), saying, “This is for you to use to buy yourselves something to eat during your journey.”

I was stunned by this action, and afterwards I looked for the child to talk with him further. I asked him, “Where did you get this money?”

He replied that the principal of the school had told the students two days before that they should prepare a gift for the delegation. So the boy went fishing. “This is what I got when I sold my fish,” he said.

—Laurent Kamizelo Kianza, CMCo General Secretary

or cell phone coverage (available in many other areas). Those who want to use the Internet must travel to either Kikwit or Tshikapa, both several days' walk away.

The isolation Mennonites in Mukedi feel is not only a result of the lack of transportation and communication, however. Decades ago, North American Mennonites handed over control of the Mennonite churches to Congolese church leaders. At Mukedi, the Mennonite Church USA delegation heard comments and questions about this change.

"There are two ways to look at what happened," said Stanley Green, a delegation member. "One is that it was a mistake. The second is to say it provided a way for the Congolese and Americans to ... come together as equals and that maybe it was a part of God's plan for preparing us for this new kind of relationship."

"A friend is also there in the bad times. In our time of suffering in recent years, we felt left out in the cold," said one pastor. "How will we build this relationship?"

While they were unsure what this new relationship would be like, both groups said they were willing to discern how the relationship should be formed and maintained.

The Mennonite Church USA delegation learned that CMCo evangelists

often spend days walking from place to place to share their message and to help equip others to be more effective in evangelism.

While the evangelists travel and other men seek work, many women are left to maintain their homes and support the life of the church. According to church leaders, women comprise up to 90% of the Congolese Mennonite churches.

"I rejoice to see women in the delegation," said Bena Kangaji, a pastor's wife and English teacher in Gungu. According to Kamizelo, CMCo is working to encourage more women and congregations to see the potential for women in leadership roles within the church.

"It's important for them to see two men and two women who are not married as being sent from the American Mennonite church," Kamizelo said. "It shows that in America you don't just talk about equality; you take it seriously. It's what we're working for, but it will take time."

"We need to evaluate together the strengths and needs of each other," said Steve Penner, delegation member, following the visit. "The Congolese have good insights to give us about our weaknesses and needs as they see them, just as we are able to do the same for them, but it has to be a process that we go through together as equals."

It's not about money, but it is about money!

Leaders from churches in both the United States and Congo agreed it is difficult to build mature relationships where both churches can give and receive gifts. Mennonite Church USA delegation members repeatedly felt expectations in the parishes that the Americans had come to give money—despite Congolese leaders' assertions each time that the visit was about building friendships.

"It's about money, whether we want it to be or not," said Ron Byler, a member of the delegation, following the visit. Byler noted that even though the delegation repeatedly said the visit was about building relationships, and Congo leaders said it too, the group was repeatedly asked to fund projects, sometimes with a formal letter of request during a worship services.

"Our people want to be self-sufficient. Our problem is how to get there to motivate them," said Benjamin Mubenga. "Poor roads and communication options make visiting them difficult and costly," he added.

Throughout the visit, delegation members were shown economic generation projects including rabbit breeding, bread baking, palm oil and grain producing. Congolese leaders said their congregations need to generate sources of income within the church, rather than expect help to come from outside the church.

During an evaluation in Kinshasa at the conclusion of the visit, Mubenga noted it was difficult to convince Congolese church members—especially parish, district, and provincial leaders—that the delegation did not bring financial gifts. He said:

"Many people were prepared with their projects or their personal requests. Some went so far as to suggest that the delegation had given money, but only to the church president.

"The result is suspicion and false rumors that undermine our work. People say, 'Maybe our president doesn't have the confidence of our partners!' When I traveled with the delegation to Kinshasa, our church members assumed I would not come back empty-handed. 'You are our vehicle [to transport



Addie Banks, a Mennonite pastor at King of Glory Tabernacle in the Bronx, New York, USA, and a member of the Mennonite Church USA delegation, preaches at Mont Gafula church in Kinshasa, Congo, with the help of an interpreter. "God's purpose is to make one group from two to embody the power of Christ," she said.

photo by Anna Groff

American gifts],’ they told me.

“Everyone knows that when Americans come into our churches, they do not come empty-handed. Rather they bring with them what is necessary to resolve or to respond to immediate needs or projects that they encounter. No one here can imagine that Americans would come and go without leaving anything.

“In our culture, when a person comes to visit someone who is known to be going through hard times or facing difficult circumstances, the visitor brings something that can give a bit of relief. It has required a lot of explaining on our part to respond to a different idea. But it is our responsibility to tell and teach our members that there are times when we can be visited without receiving anything.

“This attitude of people waiting for

Reverend Benjamin Mubenga, CEM president, was one of the hosts of the Mennonite Church USA delegation. “Our people want to be self-sufficient,” he says. But economic conditions and hardships often make it impossible for them to be so. Consequently, when a delegation from North America visits, the people expect to receive gifts.

assistance is tied to the socio-economic-political situation of our country, and it is aggravated by the high rate of unemployment among our members, who cling to the idea that they will receive gifts from abroad.

“The responsibility for working at this issue must be shared between the church in Congo and our brothers and sisters in the United States.”



Mennonite Church USA photo

Sharing gifts across difficult economic barriers

What does it mean for the global Anabaptist church to share gifts, particularly when economic and social conditions are so different?

As general secretary of the CMC, I had to answer this and other questions from my churches:

- What kinds of gifts are we speaking of when we talk of sharing gifts?
- Is the injunction of Jesus to “Love your neighbours as yourselves” practised by our Mennonite sisters and brothers of the USA? If so, what is their position in response to the politics of the American government, particularly those that contribute to conflict around the world—as in the case of Iraq?

Everywhere the delegation went, it was warmly welcomed, particularly by children, such as these boys at Mukedi.

- Can faith in Jesus be reconciled with the spiritual, moral, material, and physical development of Mennonites?

Among the exchanges that took place, this one stands out in my mind. Stanley Green from the USA said: “Our Congolese Mennonite brothers and sisters take plenty of time during their daily routines to pray, to praise, and to glorify God. They are patient in giving thanks and in listening to God’s word.”

By contrast, a pastor said, “Look at the conditions in which God is worshiped in the Mennonite churches of Congo!” (Some Congo church buildings are built of grass or straw; when it rains the service cannot continue.) “Are these the gifts that we should share with Mennonites elsewhere? What will they do with them?”

Another pastor observed during the

visit: “Evangelists cover long distances on foot or on bicycle to share the message of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; sometimes they go hungry, sometimes they’re attacked along the way. Is that something 21st century Mennonites elsewhere can understand?”

“At a time when other churches (such as the Catholics) continue to support their Congolese sisters and brothers 100%, Mennonites are reducing their contributions, because they say the Congo church has come of age. What does this mean for gift sharing?”

In my view, we need to have more such visits and exchanges, but there should be clear objectives about these exchanges. In addition, I think we should make more efforts to better understand biblical passages which have been poorly interpreted in the past, such as “Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

These interpretations have made it possible for there to be such great disparities between Mennonites in Congo and those in North America.

As one of the participants in this visit, I am comforted by the idea that an eventual outcome of our relationship might be that when we speak of sharing gifts, we see it as a reciprocal sharing rather than a one way process.

—Luarent Kamizelo Kianza



photo by Marathana Prothro

by Wilmar Stahl

The Chaco: where ethnic groups

Editor's note: This article was written for Courier / Correo / Courrier following a Paraguayan colloquium on interethnic relationships in the Chaco last December. We include it in this issue to promote understanding of the people and churches in the country scheduled to host MWC's next assembly in 2009.

The Chaco area in central Paraguay has become the place of the coexistence of many different ethnic groups and their respective cultures. Because of many cross-migrations—migrations which joined the indigenous Enlhet people in the area—there are now seven distinct ethnic groups living in the Chaco. The Nivaclé people are the largest of these groups.

Beginning in 1927, German Mennonite immigrant groups chose this relatively inhospitable region of Paraguay as their new “homeland.” In the last 50 years they have also been joined by an increasing migration of Latin-Paraguayans to the region.

Interrelationships between these various ethnic groups occur, first of all, in economics: government programs, commercial contacts, or involvement in the regional labor market. Even so, on the whole, the various groups maintain their cultural identity through such things as language, family organization, and community celebrations.

Christianity is the religion professed by all the groups. The Christian churches have an autonomous organization and manage their affairs in their respective languages.

Multiethnic cooperation. Socio-economic cooperation does take place between the German Mennonite communities and some 12 Enlhet and Nivaclé communities. The latter have

all chosen an agrarian lifestyle, with their economy geared toward agriculture and cattle raising.

The Enlhet and Nivaclé communities, with a population of 14,000, have formed an intercommunity alliance called the Federación Regional Indígena del Chaco Central (FRICC). This organization promotes exchange and coordination between those living in these communities as they come into contact with their new social, political, and economic environment.

One of the tasks of FRICC during the past ten years has been organizing colloquiums in which the participating communities address specific issues regarding community development. Political and religious leaders, young and old, men and women—all get together to share their outlook on such things as community organization, food safety, the kind of education they seek, the social values which guide their economics, interdependence, and self-sufficiency. Lecturers come from the com-

The emerging face of th

by Ray Brubacher

This is going to be a long month, I thought to myself as I arrived at the home of my host family. My luggage had not arrived at the end of my long overnight flight. My room was covered in dust from bathroom repairs, and installation of the air conditioner would not happen until later that evening.

But by 10:00 p.m., my room was clean and cool, and I was introduced to the family ice cream store, the *Heladería el Portal*, attached to the house.

I had come to Paraguay for the month of February to study Spanish and to continue working with local staff preparing for MWC's Assembly 15, scheduled for Asunción, Paraguay, in 2009.

During that month, I learned that two half-time jobs do not nec-

essarily make a whole! But the month flew by as I followed a daily routine of language study in the morning, office work in the afternoon, an evening run, a bowl of ice cream, and the evening meal when the family restaurant closed at 10:00 p.m. (I ate more ice cream that month than I usually do in a whole year!)

Most of all, my month with my hosts, the Harder family, put me in touch with the emerging face of the Mennonite family in Paraguay. Enrique (or Heinz), grew up in the German-speaking colony called “Menno,” one of the largest colonies in the Chaco. He manages one of the colony's stores in Asunción. Susy grew up in a Spanish-speaking Catholic family in the city. She manages the restaurant and other tasks at home. Their three teenage children—Carlos, Erich and Jessica—attend the Mennonite-related Concordia School.

Most German-speaking Mennonites



...s are learning to live together

munities themselves, and the exchange of ideas takes place mostly within workshops set up according to membership in the different language groups.

Interethnic consultation. In December 2006, the FRICC called on representatives of the neighboring German-Mennonite and Latin-Paraguayan communities to meet and evaluate the status of the interethnic relations in the central Chaco region.

The consultation also looked at what steps were necessary to improve the relationships. The various groups responded to the challenge and came to the meeting ready to share.

In the first part of the colloquium, the various ethnic groups talked about their identities as well as their hopes and concerns as a community. What emerged was the following:

The Nivaclé as an ethnic group value harmony and support among relatives. They see themselves actively

involved in the socioeconomic life of the country.

The Enlhet project themselves as an ethnic group which remains faithful to their cultural norms; they are adjusting economically by taking on “new jobs,” and they consider themselves Christian.

For the Spanish-speaking group, a shared history and fluency in the Guaraní language provide the basis for their identity. Socially, they enjoy significant family cohesion and native customs, but are seeking to improve

...e Mennonite family in Paraguay

The Harder family outside La Roca church on a Sunday morning (from left): Jessica, Susy, Enrique, Erich, Carlos.

migrated to Paraguay during the 20th century, some seeking separation from the world, others seeking a new home after fleeing war-torn Europe as refugees. Mennonites in Paraguay have been known primarily as a distinct Germanic cultural group who excelled at making good cheese. In fact, Mennonite farmers produce about 75% of the country’s dairy products.

Other than hiring local laborers and connecting via evangelistic and service programs, the Germanic, Latino, and Indigenous cultures remained distinct and separate for the most part.

But those lines are beginning to blur as these colorful cultures intermingle, including inter-marriage, as, for example, Enrique and Susy. As a child, Susy says she knew about Mennonites but never imagined mar-



rying one. To her, “Mennonite” was more a culture than a faith.

That stereotype is changing. Several years ago, Susy, Enrique, and their oldest child, Carlos, were baptized together at the new Spanish-speaking Mennonite church, *La Roca*, in Asunción. One of Susy’s sisters is also married to a German-speaking Mennonite. Susy says her father, a Catholic, is very supportive of his

daughters’ faith journey with the Mennonites.

Such is the emerging face of Mennonites in Paraguay. Believers from around the world can experience it for themselves when MWC’s global assembly gathers in Asunción July 13-19, 2009.

Ray Brubacher serves as International Coordinator for MWC’s Assembly 15.



their social and economic living conditions.

The German-speaking group forges its identity on the basis of its cultural traditions. This group lays special emphasis on family cohesion, the use of a common language—“Plautdietsch”—and cooperation within the group. Economically, this group strives for progress; its values come from biblical Christian faith.

Interethnic conflicts. The Nivaclé have not forgotten their history, and they fear the return of the political oppression which they suffered in the past. Economically, they feel a certain friction with other groups because of the competition for the same jobs and for sufficient land to cultivate. Culturally, conflicts arise because of interference by members of other groups, who promote the consumption of alcohol and what they consider to be other “bad habits” in their communities. Sometimes the Nivaclé feel despised by other ethnic groups that take pride in the success they have achieved in terms of production.

According to the Enlhet, potential conflicts may arise between groups because of the rivalry that comes from political party alignment. Interethnic

conflicts may also occur as a result of mixed marriages, particularly when a spouse wants to live within the community yet does not want to adopt the Enlhet culture. Traffic accidents have also been and continue to be a source of conflict among ethnic groups. The fact that the boss and the employee have diverse interpretations regarding the terms of the contract often leads to misunderstandings in the workplace.

At the colloquium, the Spanish-speaking Latin-Paraguayan group listed these things as some of the main sources of conflict: lack of respect for their culture, i.e., religious fanaticism; prejudices rooted in language; widespread distrust because of the negative behavior of some individuals. Other possible areas of conflict are lack of jobs, failure to comply with labor laws, conflicts over access to land and drinkable water, and crowded living conditions in working-class neighborhoods.

The German-Mennonite group acknowledged that within interethnic contexts, having the economic power is easily understood as being oppressive and lacking in sensitivity. This power is also likely to provoke envy and hatred. Massive immigration to the Central Chaco area will surely increase the demand for services and jobs, which the economy is currently not able to provide. Furthermore, traffic accidents and accidents in the workplace involving members of various ethnic groups are highly sensitive issues and make for interethnic friction.

Transforming interethnic conflicts. At the conclusion of the December 2006 consultation, the various groups gave several recommendations for improving relationships and avoiding

conflicts between the various ethnic groups. For the Nivaclé, these included: respect for the cultural expressions of other groups; developing inter-group personal and social relationships; fair distribution of jobs. “Act as though guided by God’s logic,” the Nivaclé said. Suggestions from the Enlhet group included: endorsing a pacific solution to all problems as a matter of principle; following the laws of the nation and Christian principles in the search for solutions to problems; encouraging open dialogue and cooperation among the ethnic groups.

For the Spanish-speaking group, cooperation and the solution of interethnic conflicts can come through: interethnic dialogue and solidarity; creation of a significant number of jobs; vigilance for justice in interethnic social and economic relationships; education in integration in those schools attended by all ethnic groups.

The following are some of the recommendations for better relationships from the German-speaking group: putting aside feelings of superiority based on economic success; supporting the education that fosters communication between various cultures, including cross-cultural experiences; undertaking joint social actions involving the various ethnic groups in order to further the cooperation between neighbors and enabling the access to land of those who wish to live in the Chaco; creating an interethnic institute aimed at preventing and transforming interethnic conflicts.

The people who live in the Chaco want to foster reconciliation between people within their groups and between groups. They are also interested in reconciliation between people and God.

Wilmar Stahl serves in the Paraguayan Chaco as an anthropological consultant with the Asociación Menonita de Servicios de Cooperación Indígena.



Toward a common cloud of witnesses

by Helmut Harder

In the early centuries of the Christian church, persons martyred for their faith belonged to all the churches. With time, however, and especially during the Reformation period, churches began to confine martyrs to those within their own tradition.

A re-reading of the New Testament raises question about such selectivity and challenges the church to broaden its perspective once more. According to Hebrews 12:2-3, the “great cloud of witnesses” appears as one cloud led by one Lord. Can the church today embrace a common “cloud of witnesses”?

That was the question before representatives from six global bodies when they met February 19-21, 2007. The group of eight included Catholics, Lutherans, Orthodox, Anglicans, Reformed, Mennonites, a spokesperson for CEC (Conference of European Churches), and a representative of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.

The purpose of the gatherings—the first of which took place in 2004—is to promote the ecumenical commemoration of outstanding witnesses of the Christian faith; to encourage the healing of memories; and to develop a common “cloud of witnesses” that could strengthen the mission of the church in our day.

In its deliberations, the group soon discovered that embracing a common “cloud of witnesses” raises questions. First is definition: “Who qualifies as a martyr?” Today we immediately think of martyrs as persons who have “been martyred” (suffered a violent death) for their faith. And the New Testament meaning of the Greek word *martyrs* certainly includes such persons, for example, Stephen, the first martyr.

But the New Testament term has a much broader application as well, including anyone who, in a Christ-like

Is it possible to embrace a common “cloud of witnesses” when one church’s martyr may have been another church’s condemned heretic?

way, stands out as a faithful and enduring witness to the gospel. Accordingly, such persons as Menno Simons and Mother Theresa belong to the “cloud of witnesses” even though they died of natural causes. Under challenging circumstances, they were faithful to the end.

Second, is it possible to embrace a common “cloud of witnesses” when one church’s martyr may have been another church’s condemned heretic?

Historically this was the case with the majority of Anabaptist-Mennonite martyrs. How then can they be considered martyrs by all?

This situation is true not only for Mennonites. In England, Catholics died at the hands of Anglicans, and Anglicans died at the hands of Catholics. Some churches that engaged in persecution of other Christians in the past have expressed repentance and received forgiveness for their actions.

A spirit of reconciliation is making inroads among the churches. In a recent ecumenical devotional book produced by Bose Monastery, Menno Simons is the featured martyr in the reading for January 23, the date of his conversion to Anabaptism. For Catholics, Lutherans,

and Reformed to draw spiritual inspiration from the life of Menno represents a 180-degree turn in attitude!

The practical purpose of the “cloud of witnesses” project is to prepare resources that the churches can find useful for their ministries. This could include biographical illustrations for preaching; outlines of liturgical services for special occasions; and resources for the development of curriculae.

As a first step toward realizing this goal, church groups have been invited to name prominent martyrs, from within as well as from beyond their own denomination. These are persons whose life and witness they would like to see included in resources that come out of this project. Bose Monastery, with the support of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, is willing to give time and effort to the project.

The Bose community has also agreed to host a symposium in late October 2008 under the title, “Commemorating the Witnesses of the Past—an Ecumenical Opportunity.” This international ecumenical conference will explore issues related to the formation of a common martyriology.

Given the Mennonites’ unique history of martyrdom and our zeal for mission, it is important that we engage in this discussion. For as has often been said, “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

Helmut Harder, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, serves as MWC’s representative to the common cloud of witnesses project.

The Bose Monastery in northern Italy, site of the discussion on martyrdom.



Floods ravage Indonesia's capital

Jakarta, Indonesia—Heavy rains on February 1-2, 2007, caused the severest flooding here in five years, according to reports from Eddy Sutjipto, MWC Executive Committee member from Asia who lives in Jakarta. Many people were marooned in their homes and work places.

Flooding in the greater Jakarta area had already claimed 36 lives by February 6 and 340,000 had been left homeless.

Water rose to a height of nearly four metres in some parts of the city, much of which lies below sea level. Water also poured into the city from the higher grounds in the surrounding area, creating lakes in low housing areas and forcing people to climb onto roofs or flee to the homes of relatives or to evacuation sites.

Respiratory illnesses, skin irritations, and other diseases, such as typhoid and dengue fever, linked to having homes submerged in dirty water affected thousands of residents.

"Two of my friends are already hospitalized," reported Elina Ciptadi, chair of AMIGOS, MWC's youth committee, also from Jakarta.

"A friend of mine from church stayed at home for three days without electricity," said Ciptadi. "[The flooding] severely impacted church attendance [on February 4]."

One Mennonite church immediately began organizing donations of clothes, food and water for flood victims at other Mennonite churches and in neighbouring areas.

"Please keep us in your prayers," said Ciptadi.



John Driver was honored for 60 years of ministry, service, and mission in Latin America during the Southern Cone Congress. The celebration included a book in his honor: Comunidad y Misión desde la Periferia: Ensayos en celebración de la vida y ministerio de Juan Driver. The new volume, published by Kairós in Argentina and

Ediciones Semilla in Guatemala, contains contributions by theologians in churches in Latin America and Spain who have been Driver's disciples. Pictured with Driver above (center) are four writers and editors of the new work (from left): Milka Rindzinski, Juan Francisco Martínez, Driver, Dennis Byler, and César Moya.

Southern Cone Anabaptist-Mennonite Congress focuses on role of women and models for the household of God

Montevideo, Uruguay—The role of women in the life of the church and models for the household of God were the foci of the 13th Anabaptist-Mennonite Congress of the Southern Cone, which met here January 22-28.

Attending were more than 250 delegates from Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay—and fraternal participants from Colombia, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Canada and the United States.

Anabaptist perspective. Study sessions on the role of women arose out of concerns expressed by women at two previous congresses. Organizers this year invited author and theologian John Driver to present biblical studies on the role of women from an Anabaptist perspective.

Guiding participants through both the Old and New Testaments, Driver noted that the participation of women in the early church was a counter cultural community in the midst of a patriarchal society.

Dennis Byler, author and

theologian from Burgos, Spain, addressed the Congress on models for the household of God. He discussed fraternal relationships, conflict resolution, authority in the church, and the challenge to the church in confronting violence.

He concluded by inviting his hearers to own this declaration: "All that is not conformed to the Spirit of Jesus are vain words, pious lies without any real power to take us from this present cruel and violent world into the new world of peace and justice which all humanity longs wholeheartedly to experience."

In group discussions and plenary sessions following each presentation, churches in different countries shared their experiences, questions, and responses around each theme.

Each night, the delegation from Concepción, Chile, presented a dramatization which illustrated the daily studies. Several groups also gave cultural presentations characteristic of their own countries.

Women met together to share reports and to reflect on the situations in their countries. They named a committee to work further on the role of women agenda.

AMIGOS. Young people participated in special meetings to learn about AMIGOS, MWC's global youth organization. Sarah Thompson, USA, and Amandus Reimer, Paraguay, highlighted plans for a second Global Youth Summit (GYS) to be held with MWC's 15th assembly in Paraguay in 2009.

The closing worship service on Sunday morning, January 28, coincided with the celebration of World Fellowship Sunday as arranged by MWC. A worship team from Uruguay led the service, and Waldemar Driedger, elder pastor in the Mennonite Church of Uruguay, preached on the love of God. He also led in celebrating the Lord's Supper.

The next Congress is scheduled for Chile in 2011.—*Milka Rindzinski*

Zimbabwe church requests prayer from the global community

Strasbourg, France—Danisa Ndlovu, MWC president-elect and bishop of the Zimbabwe Brethren in Christ Church, has urged sisters and brothers around the world to renewed prayer for the people of Zimbabwe

On March 11, a prayer meeting being held near the Zimbabwean capital of Harare was violently broken up by police. One person was killed, and several people, including senior leaders of the Zimbabwean opposition, were seriously

injured. Bishop Ndlovu reported that he did not know of BIC members who were involved in the incident. However, he and other BIC leaders have been participating in events organized by church and civil society groups to push for change in Zimbabwe's corrupt and violent regime.

Pray for wisdom for all those working for justice, and for a nonviolent end to the current Zimbabwean crisis, Ndlovu requests on behalf of the church

MWC is organizing an

international koinonia delegation to visit the Zimbabwean Brethren in Christ Church on August 17-29, 2007. The primary purpose of the team will be to stand in visible communion with the Zimbabwe church at this time of unabated duress.

Delegation members will divide into two groups to visit several BIC communities. They will then participate in the church's annual national assembly, scheduled for August 22-26.

The host church has

requested that the delegation provide workshops on conflict transformation and peacebuilding. MWC associate general secretary Pakisa Tshmikia is organizing the visit and will give leadership to the delegation to Zimbabwe.

MWC letter:

Zimbabwe crisis needs action at high levels

Strasbourg, France—MWC has appealed to the United Nations and the African Union to exert influence on the Zimbabwe government to change its destructive actions against its own people.

A March 29 letter to Ban Ki-moon, UN secretary general, New York, and John Kufuor, AU president, Ghana, points out that the desperate situation in Zimbabwe and the failure of its government calls for a more energetic response than quiet diplomacy.

The letter, signed by general secretary Larry Miller, follows the March 11 violent attack by police on participants in a peaceful prayer meeting near Harare, the Zimbabwean capital.

The letter notes this incident is just one recent example of on-going oppression and disregard for human rights in this country. Poverty, unemployment, skyrocketing inflation, and insecurity are causing profound suffering. Many are fleeing and becoming refugees.

The MWC letter condemns all violence in Zimbabwe and calls for immediate and positive dialogue between leaders in the country, in the region, and in the global community of nations.

President of Germany visits Mennonites in Paraguay

Asunción, Paraguay—German President Horst Köhler wanted “to learn to know the Mennonites” during a March visit here, so the German embassy along with local Mennonites took on the challenge to help him do that.

After visiting Concordia Mennonite School, the delegation toured an exhibition showing the 80-year experience of the diverse group of Mennonites in Paraguay and

their current strong interaction with local culture, society and various ethnic groups. They then met with leading representatives of local Mennonite social, economic, school, and church institutions.

Following presentations on Mennonite educational institutions and philosophy, social institutions, health care, community development, politics, and economics, the German delegation

inquired about Mennonite perspectives toward the present political process in Paraguay and on how to fight poverty. They asked about the effect of North American and European agricultural subsidies, which limit the competition of products from poor countries in the South on the world market.

Several times during this meeting—which lasted 90 minutes instead of the scheduled 45—the president and his delegation said they felt they could talk as “among friends.”

First ladies, Eva Luise Köhler from Germany and María Gloria Penayo de Duarte of Paraguay, toured the local Macá indigenous community and a community development program in the slums of Tablada. The women also attended the inauguration of a large health center for eye surgery.

The German president's tour in Latin America also included visits to Brazil and Colombia.—*from a report by Alfred Neufeld*

German president Horst Köhler with Concordia Mennonite School choir members. The choir sang a welcoming song written by Gerhard Schnitter for the president's visit.





Eastern Mennonite Missions photo

Waving country flags and balloons, international guests joined in a parade with the Integrated Mennonite Church of the Philippines (IMC) and the International Missions Association (IMA) to open the Holy Spirit in Mission Conference last September in Lumban, the Philippines. Pictured above are Keila Flores of Honduras and Samuel Lopez of the USA, parade and conference participants. The four-day conference was attended by Mennonites from around the globe who are involved in outreach work. According to IMA organizers, the purpose was “to bring new vision and release the gifts of ministry to help build the mission of the church.”

Plans on schedule for Assembly 15

Fresno, California, USA—Plans for Assembly 15 are progressing as interest grows inside and outside of Paraguay, MWC’s officers and senior staff learned from Ray Brubacher, international coordinator for the assembly, when they met here last January.

Brubacher told the group interest is particularly high in North America and Europe, where connections with Paraguay are strong because of many migrations.

MWC’s Executive Committee, meeting August 1-7, 2007, in Asunción, Paraguay, will decide whether to continue the “continental days” as in previous assemblies or move to

theme-related days in more of a teaching ministry. The Executive Committee will also decide the assembly theme.

With Assembly 15 in Paraguay only two and a half years away, overall MWC funding is in a normal situation, the group learned. Projected costs for Assembly 15 will be significantly higher than for Africa 2003, however, because of a different economy.

Thanks in part to a group of donors who have made substantial commitments to the four years leading up to 2009, MWC’s current operating fund shows a positive balance.

MWC officers and staff develop plans for koinonia delegation, global deacons

Fresno, California, USA—MWC will send a koinonia delegation to Zimbabwe in 2007. It will also develop a larger global Anabaptist deacons program.

These were two of the decisions of the MWC officers and senior staff when they held their annual gathering here January 5-6, 2007.

The koinonia delegation to Zimbabwe comes as a response to general secretary Larry Miller’s promise to Zimbabweans on behalf of all participants at the close of Assembly 14 in Bulawayo in 2003: “We will not forget you.” The purpose of the visit is to build communion and fellowship with its members there who continue to endure distress.

Three delegations.

Zimbabwe will not be the only country to receive a koinonia delegation. Officers and senior staff decided to send one in each of the next three years to a different region. The primary purpose of the teams—to be named by MWC and selected from member churches and volunteers—is to stand in solidarity with churches living in difficult circumstances, not to bring immediate solutions to their problems.

Danisa Ndlovu, MWC president-elect and Brethren in Christ bishop of Zimbabwe, told the officers that in his country “each day seems to bring more hardships.” The team will go to Zimbabwe in August at the time of the annual BIC conference.

The global Anabaptist deacons plan is also being formed in response to the service consultation held in Pasadena, California, USA,

in March 2006. While still being shaped, the intention is to create a global Anabaptist deacon commission that functions alongside other MWC commissions.

MWC leaders identified three roles for this commission:

- to be alert to needs within the global Anabaptist family;
- to call the global church to prayer;
- to organize a response.

The majority of MWC member churches are in the South, many of them in particular need. Miller notes that, while churches perform the role of deacon in their local contexts, and Mennonite service agencies respond generously to world disasters, there has been too little attention to addressing ongoing needs in the global Anabaptist faith family. Global Anabaptist deacons could help fill that void.

Just as importantly, these deacons could also be alert to the diverse needs of the churches in the global North and help the worldwide family of faith to respond.

Global deacons. Part of the goal is to create an ongoing list of potential deacons from which people with appropriate skills would be called for a specific time and particular tasks. MWC, in consultation with host countries, would provide orientation prior to visits.

Pakisa Tshimika, MWC associate general secretary, and Miller will refine the proposal for a global Anabaptist deacons commission. It will go to the MWC Executive Committee for action when it meets in Asunción, Paraguay in August.



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If youth could build the church

by Heidi Kauffmann

This article is another in a series developed by the Francophone Mennonite Network on youth in the church. Youth in Switzerland, France, Quebec, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Burkino Faso were invited to respond to these questions: "What is your vision for the church? What do you expect of the church? What are your dreams for the church?"

Imagine an evening meeting of a youth group, where each person is invited to create a picture of the ideal church. What would this church look like? Would it resemble anything that already exists?

Here's what I imagine the picture would look like:

Large and small. This would be a large, thriving church because everyone would go there; everyone would find their place, be at ease, and stay there. But at the same time, the church would be small. Everyone would know each other,

would greet each other after the service, and would gather around one table for fellowship meals.

Real and abstract. The church in this work of art would be concrete, a representation of the local church, its building, its members, its activities. But it would also be abstract, an image of the church as the bride of Christ; the worldwide body of believers past and present who prepare for their Lord's return.

Colorful and modest. This church would be a colorful multicultural church, with lively singing and free and diverse ways of expressing faith. But it would be modest as well, not given to excess, not carried away by every new wind that blows, full of wisdom, and grounded in a firm foundation.

Open and closed. This church would be open to the world, with evangelization its key theme. It would welcome those in need and serve the deprived of the earth. It would also be closed—like a refuge, a stronghold in which the Lord shelters us from a cruel world.

Tow-headed and graying.

The church would have a full Sunday school where tow-headed youngsters turn to the Lord, where the faith of the youngest encourages the eldest. There would also be graying heads and respect for the elderly who, in return, provide support through their prayers and guidance through their experience and wisdom. A healthy and constructive intergenerational relation-

ship would witness to the nature of the family of God.

Elaborate and simple. The ideal church would be elaborate, because it is never satisfied with what it has accomplished, constantly seeking to grow, to progress, and to deepen its knowledge of the Lord. But it would also be simple, because the faith of a child will always be the example to follow.

Bold and soft. This church would be bold, full of life, active, with many driving forces. But it would also be soft, free of conflict, radiating a sense of peace.

Clear and blurred lines.

Our ideal church would have a clear outline. All its members are part of the family of God and have their names written in heaven. There is no room for impostors. But its lines would also be blurred because it is not limited to the local congregation. It reaches around the world.

It would be a church in the world but not of the world; a church concerned about others and about each individual, actively awaiting Jesus' return as it prays, "Thy kingdom come!"

Surely this is a vision for the church that the young and the not-so-young can share. It is up to all of us to act as though it were not just a dream, but a reality!

Heidi Kauffmann is president of the Youth Commission of the Evangelical Mennonite Churches of France.



CORRECTION

Incorrect information appeared in our last issue about where to secure the German editions of *From Anabaptist Seed / Täuferische Saat - Weltweites Wachstum* by C. Arnold Snyder and *God's Shalom Project / Schalom - das Projekt Gottes* by Bernhard Ott.

The correct information is as follows:

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Our apologies for this error.—C/C/C

Perspective:

Church-to-church relationships are all about people

by Nancy R. Heisey

From the earliest days of the Jesus movement, Christians have wanted to meet, eat, and talk with each other. They have wanted to observe and participate in worship with Christians in other places.

One of the reasons for this desire was a widespread understanding that Christians were forming a “new people.” The identity of this new people was not shaped by the old dualities that organized perceptions of the other: us and them, Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and barbarians. Christians were people, an early Christian letter tells us, for whom “every foreign land is their homeland, and every homeland is a foreign land.”

Thus the tombstone of Avircius Marcellus, a second-century believer from Asia Minor, describes his travels as far as Rome and the Euphrates, noting that everywhere he found Christians who set before him “the fish” (from the Greek acronym for Jesus Christ), together with bread and wine.

And the diary of Rabban Sawma, a monk from China who traveled to Rome in the thirteenth century, describes how he celebrated communion for the pope and his company, so that they could see how these eastern strangers worshiped. He reports: “And when they had seen they rejoiced, and said, ‘The language is different, but the use is the same.’”

Members of the Mennonite World Conference family are thus joining in an ancient Christian practice when we look for ways to build church-to-church relationships.

Pilgrimage is another image of putting feet on our desires

to be in communion with sisters and brothers in other places. Pilgrims travel long distances, leaving comfort and familiarity behind, in their desire to enter into holy space. Pilgrims want to be energized and changed in some way by entering a place with which they are somehow familiar, yet which they recognize as bigger than what they know.

But the kind of pilgrimage the Mennonite World Conference family participates in most often is not first of all about place; it’s about people. The reason for traveling is to find and meet those who are part of our family, despite all the ways in which we are different.

Although we are stimulated by what is hard to recognize, the hope of our pilgrimage to people is that we find ways to share with new sisters and brothers the common call to live in Jesus’ way. And while many of us travel on foot or crammed three on a seat of a bus—as others move about on 767s—we can rejoice in breaking bread or tortillas or ugali or chapatti together.

Experiencing the hospitality of far-flung family, however, is only the beginning. Our challenge then is to move together toward a more profound oneness in the Living Bread.

Nancy Heisey, Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA, serves as president of Mennonite World Conference.



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