

Minutes

Winnipeg Mennonite-Catholic Dialogue, Meeting No. 1

Held on 20 June 2000
at the Canadian Mennonite Bible College

MORNING SESSION

Participants:

Dr John Long: Member of the Mary Mother of the Church Parish, Fort Garry. Member of the education faculty, U of M, has participated in the Lutheran and Anglican-Catholic exchanges.

Ardith Frey: Pastor of the Aberdeen Evangelical Mennonite Conference Church. Married and mother.

Dr. Richard Lebrun: Retired church historian, former faculty member at St. Paul's College, U of M, member of the St. Ignatius Parish.

Michele Sala Pastora: serves the St. Boniface diocese in pastoral education. Married and mother.

Henry Loewen: works for the Conference of Mennonites of Manitoba as executive director.

Dr. Adolf Ens: Semi-retired CMBC faculty member. Taught church history. Married and father.

Elaine Pinto: Chaplain at the St. Boniface Hospital, member of McIvor Avenue Mennonite Brethren Church.

Michael Radcliffe: Lawyer with long practice involving Hutterites, had a career in politics, member of St. Ignatius Parish. Married and father.

Sr. Elaine Baete: Member of Grey Nuns, spiritual direction and counseling, St. Boniface Hospital.

Dr. Helmut Harder: Professor emeritus, CMBC, former executive secretary of Conference of Mennonites of Canada, participant in official Catholic-Mennonite dialogue.

Fr. Luis Melo: Chaplain at St. Paul's College, U of M. Participant in ecumenical work.

Harold Jantz: former editor of *Mennonite Brethren Herald* and national evangelical publications. Communications consultant. Member of River East Mennonite Brethren Church.

Greetings: **Dan Nighswander** welcomed the group and brought greetings as general secretary of the Mennonite Church Canada. He affirmed the purpose of meeting and expressed his well wishes for it.

Helmut Harder and **Luis Melo** acted as the co-chairs of the day's discussions.

1. Purpose of the meeting

Helmut Harder: This is the “first round” of dialogue on the relations between us as we walk side by side—whether separately or together. This day does not assume the future. We have not asked for the blessing of the Mennonite Church, the closest we’ve come is to ask for Dan Nighswander’s blessing. At the same time I didn’t think it was consistent to go to Rome, Venice and Strasbourg and not meet with Catholics here. We will ask about the future of our exchange here at the end of the day. I spoke to Fr. Luis Melo about my concerns and this gathering is the outcome.

Luis Melo: We got the blessings of both the Archbishop Leonard Wall (former archbishop of the Archdiocese of Winnipeg) and the ecumenical office of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops in Ottawa.

2. Our experience of the other church

Each person in the group related some experience(s) through which they had made a connection to the other church.

Michael Radcliffe: Had represented Hutterites in legal matters for 20 years. During that time he became immersed in Anabaptist history and had the occasion to lecture the courts, including the Supreme Court, on the Anabaptist movement.

Sr. Elaine Baete: She grew up near Holland, Manitoba, close to Hutterites and now works in the St. Boniface Hospital, where she has come to know many Mennonite nurses.

Harold Jantz: Followed Catholic issues through his editorial work and in preparation for a national Faith and the Media Conference engaged Cardinal Ambrozic for the event because he wanted a “genuine man of faith” as one of the opening night’s headline speakers. Has written about Catholic and evangelical relations. Has read quite a bit of the current Pope’s writing, and has often felt he was speaking for him [Jantz] too when he spoke to current issues.

Dr. Richard Lebrun: Has taught Anabaptism and their treatment in his church history courses at St. Paul’s.

Ardith Frey: Grew up isolated from Catholics, but encountered them in Africa during an MCC assignment. Met Catholic volunteers within MCC and related to Catholic leaders in the work as program director.

Elaine Pinto: Grew up in a Mennonite Brethren setting isolated from Catholics, but loved cathedrals, the mystical. Took courses at St. Benedict’s (centering on prayer and the mystical life) and from the Winnipeg theological consortium (with attention to Vatican 1 & 2). Now chaplain at St. Boniface Hospital. Feels pained in the heart at the divided Eucharist.

Michele Sala Pastora: Has worked on justice issues with John Peters and Ed Wiebe, got to know both of them through the International Centre, working with refugees. Has also worked with Mennonites in Habitat for Humanity. Prior to coming to work for the St. Boniface diocese, was involved in the Assiniboine Christian Centre where she met Mennonite ministers in the area—a very enriching experience. She was in mission in Nicaragua, where she met her husband. Has been impressed by the Mennonite emphasis on missions.

Dr. Adolf Ens: Had few experiences with Roman Catholics growing up in southern

Manitoba. At university a Ukrainian Catholic roommate led to many interesting discussions. Participated in US civil rights movement in which he encountered Catholic colleagues. Grad studies in Ottawa in the '70s led to rewarding contacts within the Ottawa Christian Council. Volunteer service in Africa in the '80s resulted in positive encounters with Catholics.

Dr. John Long: Most of his relationships are personal—with Neil, Phyllis, etc., whose roots are Mennonite. He finds it ironic that if he wants to hear the great music of the Latin Church, he goes to hear Mennonite singers. It's a puzzle to him that we don't have more common action.

Henry Loewen: Grew up in the Winkler-Morden area where the first impressions of Catholics was that they weren't Christians. Had first significant contact with Catholics in Normal School. Sat across from Catholic girls. The first person to impress him as a Christian was Father Hanley at St. Paul's College, which became the foundation of many meaningful relationships. Taught with Catholic friends, one of whom became a priest, while Loewen became a lay minister. Would like to see Mennonites and Catholics work together on something.

Helmut Harder: Grew up in southern Ontario, a cosmopolitan area, where the feeling was "they're Catholic but they're okay." At seminary the book by Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism Neither Protestant nor Catholic*, gave him an appreciation for Catholics. The essay by Hillerbrand, with its appreciation for Anabaptism, the view of God incarnate and its ecclesiology, built bridges to Catholicism. Later in study at the U of Toronto, Harder enrolled at Emmanuel College but found his greatest kinship with Catholics at St. Michael's.

Fr. Luis Melo: His early contact with Mennonites was limited; he encountered the Old Order Mennonites at the St. Lawrence Market in Toronto. When he came to Winnipeg, his eyes were opened to other Mennonites. Had a young Mennonite friend who was struggling with the question of celibacy. Viewed negatively by other Mennonites. During studies in Rome gained a view of the larger church.

3. Larger context of Mennonite-Catholic dialogue

Helmut Harder referred to a report he will be giving to the Mennonite General Council meeting in Guatemala City, Guatemala, July 16–23. The seeds for the Catholic-Mennonite dialogue can be found in the invitation for Paul Kraybill to attend the convocation of religious leaders initiated by Pope John Paul II in Assisi in 1982. He walked and talked with other religious leaders there, but within the Mennonite church community it created tension: a Russian Mennonite group in Germany withdrew from the MWC as a result.

The theme given to the Mennonite-Catholic dialogue is *Toward a Healing of Memories*, planned as a five-year series of annual meetings.

So far two meetings have taken place, in Strasbourg, France, and Venice, Italy. A third is planned for the Thomashof in Germany, November 24–30, 2000. It is hoped the outcome of the five years will be a joint statement that will address the indictments expressed against one another. The next meeting will examine the Constantinian "fall".

Each of the earlier meetings have included four substantial papers, two historical and two theological or sociological in nature, with both sides offering two of the papers. Papers on

ecclesiology were given by James Puglisi and **Helmut Harder**. Someone asked what gift it is that Catholics can give Mennonites and the answer was “unity.” To the question of the gift Mennonites can give Catholics, the answer was “peace.” This was the heart of the Strasbourg meeting. It was also very healing to hear the confession that there was no justification for what Catholics did to Mennonites. Neither could the words Menno Simons used against Catholics be justified.

In Venice James Puglisi used language of the “people of God” in discussion about ecclesiology. The two sides found very deep affinity of views. A Guatemalan Mennonite, Mario Higueros, brought communion elements to the meeting and asked what thoughts they raised for the participants. The response was “hope.” Mario ended by asking why we can’t share a common table. Discussions of this kind are going on in a number of places.

AFTERNOON SESSION

4. Mennonite-Catholic convergences

Helmut Harder began by reading a piece by Levi Miller on relating to Catholics and what we can learn. He referred to an item that appeared in the Canadian Mennonite, written by Arthur Boers, who calls himself a Benedictine Mennonite. He also referred to Ivan Kauffman, a former Mennonite who became a Catholic and has written extensively about Mennonite-Catholic convergences. Some of those are happening at grassroots levels. For example, in Landmark, Mennonites and Catholics have had a meeting; in the Glenbush-Spiritwood-Lashburn area of Saskatchewan, they’ve held joint services; and in Charleswood, they’ve had readers in one another’s services. These events were more grassroots than hierarchical.

Dr. Adolf Ens: Presented a paper on Mennonite-Catholic relations in earlier Manitoba history. [See Attachment 1].

Both Ontario and Quebec saw Manitoba as a place where they could replicate themselves. Mennonites were the first significant group to come to Manitoba outside these groups. They were given a \$100,000 loan from the government to come here. The main opposition in Parliament came from a Quebec MP who wanted similar help for Quebecers in the US who wanted to return to live in Canada. The Mennonites who came to Manitoba were quite “separatist” in their attitudes. They had relatively little interaction with others, which was true also in relation to French Catholics living nearby. J.Y. Shantz described the French half-breeds as he termed them, as “civilized and satisfied.”

The first significant description of Mennonites was written by Catholic missionary, Rev. Pere Jean-Theobald Bitsche, who wrote a series of articles in French that were published in installments in *Le Manitoba* in 1883–4. **Ens** described them as accurate but not flattering. Some early Mennonite villages had significant numbers of non-Mennonites of Lutheran and Catholic background, Gretna and Plum Coulee, for example had 27% and 21% who were German Catholics in 1901. Altona had Catholic businessmen. Mennonites did not respond well to ruthless American capitalism, neither did the Catholics. Also they wanted control of education, which the French also wanted. When the Greenway government abolished French as an official language and imposed non-denominational schools in 1890, Mennonites were affected almost exactly as French Catholics were. Both

Mennonites and Catholics took advantage of bilingual schools when that compromise was reached in 1897.

During WW1, when bilingual schools were abolished and Mennonites began casting about for a new homeland, the first place they checked out was Quebec. Quebec leaders commented favorably on the idea of moving there, but the Mennonites who surveyed the province, found the farmland unsuitable.

For many years Mennonites were represented in Parliament by a French Catholic, Albert Prefontaine. Mennonites continued to vote for him, even though he changed parties several times. Later his son succeeded him. In 1962, Edmond's son nominated Leonard Barkman who then went on to win the seat as a Liberal.

Discussion of Ens's presentation: Mennonites and Catholics were for the most part like two solitudes, even though they lived side by side. Though they shared many similarities, they stayed quite distant. Both Catholics and Mennonites agreed that parents had the prior responsibility for the education of their children.

Elaine Pinto's survey of attitudes in the McIvor Avenue Mennonite Brethren Church toward Catholics. [See Attachment 2]

General observations:

- most of the respondents saw others as harder in their attitudes toward Catholics than themselves.
- many were supportive to relating more strongly, to removing the barriers, but there is a long history of distrust and questions about differences in beliefs to contend with – are open to relating to Catholics as Christians but don't see them as "evangelical" – have found ways of relating and working together, e.g. Marymount, March for Jesus, local Bible study groups, Marriage Encounters, pro-life organizations, on projects like Habitat for Humanity, etc.
- concerns expressed in terms of differences in doctrine, way the Bible is viewed, control exercised by priests, etc.
- McIvor Avenue MB Church once had a priest come speak to a Sunday school class. This has had a positive influence in bringing better understanding and reducing distrust. A number of persons voiced openness to dialogue and talking.
- generally there was support for working together to promote a moral agenda and communicate a common witness where that is possible
- in terms of education, respondents acknowledged ways in which Mennonites and Catholics already work together in the independent school movement, for example, study in one another's schools, etc., but they advised caution in assuming that differences didn't exist
- positions of the Catholic Church on such things as birth control, on the role of women, on Mary, on the place of tradition in understanding the Scriptures, are obstacles. On the other hand, there is respect for the Pope and many of his statements. Catholic writers and persons like Mother Teresa, Oscar Romero and many others have influenced Mennonites too. The mystical tradition in Catholic practice has enriched us.

5. What more should we do?

John Long: It is easy to say yes, but what will be the agenda? I need to study and ruminate.

In our own material, we have a statement which refers to “the role of Mary in our salvation.” I don’t know what that means.

Michael Radcliffe: I’m interested in the place of history. We are what we are because of history. For example, the reference [in Elaine’s materials] to the “power of the priest.” The priest is perceived as very powerful by Mennonites, which may have been true in the ’40s and ’50s, but not now. I would like to get to current realities.

Elaine Pinto: I like issues like spirituality, learning about it and also practical ways of doing it, putting feet to it. I’m not talking necessarily about Habitat for Humanity, also about how churches can get together.

Adolf Ens: I would welcome something that deals with issues, e.g. theological issues, ecumenism, etc.

Henry. Loewen: I would be interested in issues like how do we accept persons who move from the one to the other, issues around rebaptism, communion, etc.

Harold Jantz: I would be interested in a discussion of the question of how we can witness to one another with integrity.

Michele Sala Pastora: The education question is very important to me—religious education, moral education. Education is a very lively issue.

Richard Lebrun: The history is very important. I want to see us continue to meet.

Ardith Frey: I want to continue. Worship is very important to me. Want to work at ways of relating to one another.

Luis Melo: Questions of faith and order are important to me. I think for the moment we should focus on this group finding understanding with one another.

Helmut Harder: My sense is that we ought to meet again.

Consensus on next meeting: September 27, 4 – 9 p.m. At the Jesuit Centre in St. Paul’s College on the U of M campus.

Ardith Frey agreed to prepare the opening devotions. **Michele Sala Pastora** will prepare the closing devotions.

Notes for this meeting were written by: Harold Jantz
July 13, 2000