

Minutes

Winnipeg Mennonite-Catholic Dialogue, Meeting No. 27

Meeting held on 8 January 2009
at Holy Family Church

Present: Adolf Ens, Doug Enns, Rudy Friesen (for Henry Loewen), Helmut Harder, Janet Kozak, Joseph Langan, Richard Lebrun, John Long, Luis Melo, Viola Mirochnick, and Lynda Trenholm

Regrets: Dora Dueck and Henry Loewen

1. **Helmut** reported that he had received regrets from **Dora Dueck**, who has taken over as a maternity-leave replacement for the editor of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, and **Henry Loewen**, who is in Louisiana on a MDS assignment.
2. **Janet** led us in an **opening prayer**.
3. **Sharing of ecumenical experiences:**

Adolf reported attending the funeral of his son's mother-in-law, who was in the Ukrainian Catholic tradition. The service was held at a funeral chapel, with the homily given by the woman's former pastor, now retired. Adolf found the homily very personal to the family, stressing the theme that we all have to support each other in hurtful times. He also reported that his daughter, a student at the College de Saint-Boniface, had attended a retreat at the Trappist monastery in Holland, MN.

John reported ongoing conversations with an Anglican friend, who is struggling with the very meaning of the Anglican Church. This is very difficult for him; his wife's father was an Anglican priest, and there is long tradition of Anglicanism in his family. John also reported that he was surprised during the recent federal election to be confronted by a young man who berated him because, so he claimed, signs for the Liberal candidate were being smashed by hooligans. John has since sung with the young man at a Christmas service, and hopes that the relationship has healed.

Richard reported that he was still working as a volunteer at the House of Hesed, that as a quasi-ecumenical activity he attended two Latin masses in the U.K., one at the Catholic chaplaincy at Cambridge University and one at a parish in Belfast. As a kind of show-and-tell, he displayed a book and a CD Powerpoint slide show that he and Christine Butterill had edited for the celebration of the centennial of St. Ignatius Parish.

Rudy recalled that at the time of the 9/11 events in the U.S., he and his wife were staying at the International Peace House in Washington, DC. It was of course a time of high emotions, especially towards Muslims. He had consulted the phone book and found the number of a

dozen mosques and Muslim schools, and phoned them all. He found almost all welcomed his call, thrilled to receive a friendly call, and he was able to enter into some interesting conversations with these Muslims, some of whom wanted to talk about people like Bill Graham and Martin Luther King. Rudy and his wife were subsequently invited to a large Muslim centre for a meeting, a meal, and a celebration of appreciation. Now, in the context of what is happening in Gaza, he wonders about people in Winnipeg who are hurting and who would appreciate a call. He also recalled a large interfaith gathering in late October or November 2001 with representatives of thirteen religious groups (including Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and Christians) who gathered in a large Catholic church to collaborate in a prayer for peace.

Janet said that she had been forgetting to report at our previous meetings that she participates on the last Friday of every month at a Taizé service at St. Benedict's Monastery. She reported that this year she had attended a "Singing Christmas Tree" service at Grant Memorial Baptist Church. She said that she was glad to see that the Patriarch of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Lubomyr Husar, had expressed the wish to be united to the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, expressing the view the Ukrainian Catholic Church could be a unique bridge between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches. Janet was also delighted to find a Mennonite choir singing on the steps of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly on the occasion of a remembrance of the Holodomor, the Soviet-caused forced famine in Ukraine in 1932–33. **Viola** explained the background of this event. The First Mennonite Church choir, while touring Europe in 2007, learned some Ukrainian and Russian pieces and performed them in Germany, where there are many emigrants who understand these languages. This performance led to a connection with a Ukrainian choir in Winnipeg, and, last June, to a joint fund-raising concert for Ukraine, a joint Advent service, and the commemoration of the Holodomor at the legislature.

Viola then reported her own attendance at a first Sunday in Advent lesson and carol service at All Saints Anglican Church, which she found a very worshipful service – and where she also saw many Mennonite friends. On December 8th, with the CLC (Christian Life Community) group to which she belongs, she attended a Mass in honour of the Immaculate Conception of Mary at St. Ignatius Church. As a result she has found her interest in Mary increased. She said that a Ukrainian Catholic couple in this group had brought an icon of Mary, which was honoured at the ceremony. Viola reported as well invitations to attend Aboriginal Full Moon ceremonies, which she was unable to attend because of schedule conflicts – but hopes to attend such a service in the future.

Lynda reported attended a funeral of a next-door neighbour on 29 December at a Lutheran Church, and found it very positive experience. In conversation with the Lutheran pastor, she got into discussion of the phenomenon of "Christmas and Easter Only" Christians, who can create problems when they come to Christmas service and can crowd out regular church-goers. The pastor, who is working on a Ph.D. in religion at the University of Manitoba, also asked her about possibilities for spiritual direction.

Joseph reported that he and his family were in Quebec City on Christmas Day, where they attended Mass at Notre Dame Basilica. There was no crying room, and at one point when

there was a lot of bell-ringing, their two-year old called out in a loud voice “All done!” He also reported attending the wedding in Ontario of his friend Chris Hyrniuk (a Ph. D. student in the Peace and Justice program at the University of Manitoba and a participant in the Catholic-Mennonite dialogue between faculty members from St. Paul’s College and Canadian Mennonite University) to a member of the Dutch Reformed Church. The wedding was performed by a Dutch Reformed minister at a secular venue. When Joseph asked why the event was planned this way, Wilma, the bride, replied that her understanding was the church was where people are. In honour of Chris’ Ukrainian Catholic heritage, Fr. Dave Creamer, SJ, (from St. Paul’s College) bestowed an elaborate Ukrainian blessing on the couple, which probably left Wilma’s relatives a bit confused.

Doug, who at our last meeting reported taking a German exchange student living with them to a synagogue service, reported that this Christmas a former German exchange student flew over to spend the holiday with them. Together they had driven to Abbotsford, BC, to spend Christmas with Doug’s parents. The visit provided him with an opportunity to visit with an old friend who has moved from being a Mennonite to become in turn an Anglican, an Anglo-Catholic, and now a Roman Catholic. The man has had a lot of hard knocks in his life, but he remains engaged with his faith, confident that God is leading him somewhere. Doug also reported that heavy snowfall caused all the churches in the area to cancel Christmas services, and that he and his family ended up carolling up and down the street, to the surprise of many of the neighbours.

Luis distributed handouts detailing his Recent Ecumenical Activity, and spoke to selected items on the list.

Western Diocesan-Eparchial Co-ordinators of Ecumenism. At a recent meeting in Regina the topic was Interchurch and Interfaith Marriage. Luis noted that issues were more acute when both parties practice their faith; when one party is less active, the two often move towards the denomination of the most active in the faith.

Joint Working Group of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity and the World Council of Churches (Geneva, November 13–23). (Luis also handed out a story from *Progress Ukrainian Catholic News* about the work of the meeting.) The three main themes of the meeting were Reception (of agreed statements among Christians), the Spiritual Roots of Ecumenism, and the problems, challenges, and opportunities for the ecumenical movement posed by the present global phenomenon of migration. Luis noted that working in such a group is not easy, since some (in particular some Orthodox representatives) had different attitudes towards joint prayer services, and “working” outside the regular hours of the meetings (e.g., over meals and in the evenings).

Luis helped organize and participated in the **Anglican-Roman Catholic Bishop’s Dialogue** held in St. Boniface in October. He reported frustration among the Anglicans, especially over the issue of authority. They are discovering that the “parliamentary way” is proving to be inadequate for dealing with doctrinal and pastoral questions, and they appear to be moving towards a consensus model.

Watchmen Watching, a group that believes that ecumenism is of the devil, appears to be aware our Mennonite-Catholic dialogue, and wonders how the Mennonites, a evangelical group can do this.

Luis also distributed a flyer about the upcoming **Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**, January 18–25. He highlighted the opening worship service at Heritage Park Temple (Salvation Army) and the vespers service at St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church.

Bridgefolk has proposed to Luis and Helmut that Winnipeg host the 2011 meeting of this group, which has been meeting alternately at Catholic and Mennonite venues. Bridgefolk will meet at Mennonite venue in PA in 2009, and at St. John's University in Collegeville in 2010. Luis also reported an interesting experience with Mennonites in Toronto, among whom Winnipeg appears to be regarded as the Mecca of the Mennonite world.

Helmut indicated that most of his report of ecumenical activities would be his response to the assigned paragraph in our document – on the “Cloud of Witnesses: a message to the churches from a symposium at the Monastery of Bose.” He explained that the “message” was the outcome of 75 to 80 persons from a variety of denominations and nations meeting for five days at Bose. Helmut is preparing a 6,000 word chapter for a Festschrift in honour of John Radano. In preparation for this task, Helmut has been studying the Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms of Ecumenism put out in 1993 by the Vatican's Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity. He recalled that when he had become involved in the Mennonite-Catholic dialogue that produced Called Together to be Peacemakers, he and his Mennonite colleagues had no guidelines to work with. In the chapter that he is working on, Helmut will begin to develop principles for a Mennonite approach to ecumenical dialogue.

4. **Supper break.** Janet led us to the basement hall, where we were served a wonderful Ukrainian Christmas supper.
5. **Study and discussion of A Mennonite and Catholic Contribution to the World Council of Churches' Decade to Overcome Violence.**

Since his response to the paragraph on “Peace and Reconciliation” involved setting up his computer and a projector, **Helmut** began a bit out of order.

He began by explaining the background of the document under discussion, which had its origins in the World Council of Churches' “Decade to overcome Violence,” which was first proposed at the WWC's 1998 assembly in Harari. A closing celebration is planned for Kingston, Jamaica in 2011, to which members of the Catholic-Mennonite dialogue that produced Called Together to be Peacemakers were invited to make suggestions. This resulted in a meeting in Rome in October 2007, in which Helmut participated, and at which the document under discussion was produced

Helmut then read to us the document **A Cloud of Witnesses: a message to the churches from a symposium at the Monastery of Bose** (which everyone should have received by email, and which is not reproduced here) while showing us slides of Bose Monastery and scenes from the symposium that produced the document.

Helmut also told us the story of Bose Monastery, which had its origins in the years after Vatican II, and which now has some 75 to 80 brothers and sisters. It is ecumenical, with additional members (besides Catholics) from the Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican, and

Greek Orthodox traditions. Luis added that the monastery has a publishing house, with a list of titles specializing in patristic renewal, biblical reflections, etc., and produces and markets pottery, herbs, jams, and icons. He noted that it was not recognized as an “order,” finds its identity as “disciples of Jesus,” and borrows its priests from other orders. Most recently Bose has discovered the Mennonites and Anabaptists.

Lynda, in responding the paragraph “Peace and Suffering,” began by showing us a crucifix bearing a corpus of the Risen Christ, which she likes as a more positive symbol than that of a corpus of the dying Christ. She then offered the following reflections on the paragraph:

“We understand peace through the teachings, the life, and the death of Jesus Christ;” death on a cross. When gazing on the cross it’s hard to fathom that the cross is the sign of God’s love of enemies. It was such a cruel, violent and horrific way for the Son of God to die! Indeed, it is a personal challenge for any Christian to spell out the consequences of the cross for our teaching on peace and war, and for our response in the face of injustice and violence. Yet, the cross is the hope of Christians. “In looking upon the cross of Christ we come to realize what the atonement means for us.” Christ died for our sins, for my sins. “Oh, Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me! Lord Jesus Christ through Your suffering on the cross grant me strength to bear the cross without fear or dread and give me the grace to follow you.”

“Through the cross Jesus makes our peace with God who offers us the *shalom* of a new creation while we are still sinners.” How do I perceive the cross? The cross is the journey of the pilgrim. The cross is the saviour of the lost. The cross is the crutch of the lame. The cross is the guide of the blind. The cross is the cloth of the naked. The cross is the strength of the weak. The cross is the healer of the sick. The cross is the hope of the hopeless. The cross is the freedom of the slaves. The cross is the power of kings. The cross is the consolation of those who mourn. The cross is the source of those who seek forgiveness. The cross is the way of peace and righteousness.

The cross is a constant reminder of the suffering of Jesus Christ and the love that he had for us. In his birth as a child, is the hope of the world. Born in a wooden manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes, he grew into a man who died on a wooden cross. A wooden manger held an innocent child; a wooden cross held an innocent man. It is so difficult for humanity to understand; yet so necessary for the world. We seek peace the world cannot give. We need peace; yet it seems unattainable. Certainly war and violence is not the answer. We must look to Christ who when he was abused, did not return abuse. He put himself in God’s hands as we must do. In Christ, there is a new creation. It is up to us to carry on his mission of peace and righteousness; to take our cross and follow in Christ’s footsteps.

Lynda concluded by singing for us a song by John Michael Talbet.

Richard offered the following reflections on the paragraph “Peace and Suffering.”

Somehow in growing up, I suppose from the religious training I received, I seemed to have picked up the notion that “suffering was a good thing.” Jesus, after all, had, so it was said, suffered for our sins. With respect the suffering we encountered along the way, we were

always told to “offer it up.” I’m afraid there could at times be something masochistic in all this.

I no longer think that suffering, at least suffering in itself, is a good thing. So I like the first sentences in this section of the joint statement: “We acknowledge suffering as a possible consequence of our witness to the Gospel of peace. ... Following Christ will require a costly discipleship. Mennonites and Catholics live in the expectation that discipleship entails suffering.”

This approach reminds me very much of what Walter Wink has to say about Christ’s suffering and death in his book, *Engaging the Powers* – briefly, that Jesus did not actively seek the torture and death that was meted out to Him, but that he accepted it as a consequence of his radical challenge to the “powers” of the time – the Jewish establishment and the Roman state. Wink also demonstrates at some length that the early Christians (from the time of the Resurrection until the time of Constantine) fully expected that as disciples of Jesus they would be persecuted. As this joint statement says, Mennonite and Catholics share a common appreciation of martyrs, “the great cloud of witnesses, (Heb 12:1), who have given their lives in witness to truth.”

So what the joint statement does is acknowledge up front the implications of being “a witness to peace,” the “implications for how we understand the church and what it means to be church in the world.” In a later paragraph the joint statement references statement in CTBP to the effect that “suffering is inevitable as the price that must be paid in a sinful world for loving one’s enemies in a sinful world.” The same point, in even stronger language.

I recently acquired and read a small book by Richard K. Taylor called *Love in Action: A Direct Action Handbook for Catholics Using Gospel Nonviolence to Reform and Renew the Church*. Much of what he has to say could be directly applied to all Christians seeking to use Gospel Nonviolence to promote peace. On the point I just made about accepting suffering, for example, Taylor cites 1 Peter 3:17: “For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil.” He also has a memorable quotation from Cesar Chavez: “I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of humanity, is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice.”

I acknowledge that I am very much a beginner, an apprentice, just getting started on learning what a nonviolent approach to peace is all about – but I much appreciate this document for its challenge to think more deeply about these issues.

To illustrate his assigned paragraph, Richard displayed the book by Richard K. Taylor.

Joseph told us that he had real difficulties with the paragraph “Peace and Nonviolence,” and indeed with the general message of our document. In the face of terrible injustice and oppression, is intervention not allowed? He cited Pope John Paul II about cowardice and violence, and referenced Romeo Dallaire’s book *Shaking Hands with the Devil*. For Joseph, the passage left a lot of questions. Christ did not chose violence. Joseph realizes that there are no simple answers. He wondered, for example, about a definition of “violence.”

To illustrate his paragraph, Joseph distributed material about the Arthur V. Mauro Centre for Peace and Justice at the St. Paul's College, University of Manitoba, the Mennonite Central Committee, and the Catholic organization, Development and Peace.

Discussion. **Richard** spoke of his work in the Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church in a committee charged with developing “nonviolent responses to acts of violence by the Church,” and said that he had reached the conclusion that any act by a religious or political institution that failed to respect the dignity of the individual Christian or citizen constituted a kind of violence and was unacceptable. **Luis** reflected on the use of the Internet as a means of achieving nonviolent responses to violence, and spoke of the “snowballing” effect that Internet communications have had in protesting and organizing against various kinds of injustice and violence. **Joseph** then recounted his work in Croatia with a UN committee on refugees, a place where lots of violence had occurred, where the “pain of war” was still visible on peoples’ faces. The people hated violence, but had not yet been reconciled to their enemies. Reflecting on Tutu’s Peace and Reconciliation Commission, Joseph thought that time was needed for reconciliation. **Viola** recalled hearing Karen Ridd speak about an experience in El Salvador where she had been arrested and accused of being a spy; she was finally able to persuade the police that she was not by demonstrating her abilities as a clown, blowing up balloons and fashioning them into animals for the children of the police officers. In effect, she had disarmed them. **Rudy** recalled the Karen had refused to accept her release until they also released another woman who had been arrested with her, and that dozens in the Mennonite community had had the phone number of the police station and had phoned the police demanding her release. In effect, the church had played a role in the incident.

Adolf offered the following reflections on the paragraph “Peace and Freedom.”

As a **Symbol** to illustrate his paragraph, Adolf displayed a book by John Howard Yoder, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*. Edited by Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (London: SCM and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003)

Inasmuch as the Mennonite Yoder was a life-long promoter of non-violence, and finished his teaching career at the Catholic Notre Dame University in Indiana, this book could be an appropriate symbol for any one of the sections of our joint Catholic-Mennonite proposal.

Published after Yoder’s death by two *ecumenical* publishing houses, and edited by an *ecumenical* team of two scholars (United Methodist and Jewish) in *dialogue* with Yoder’s manuscript, the book symbolizes our wish that this proposal, growing out of our bilateral Catholic-Mennonite *dialogue*, will be useful to the larger *ecumenical* community in this “decade to overcome violence.”

But more specifically, this book develops the *non-violent peace theology* of both the Jewish and Christian heritages. Further, it proposes that this peace theology and its practice are most threatened when the community of faith is so enmeshed with the state that it “cannot witness without encumbrance” to the way God revealed in Torah and Messiah.

The five-sentence paragraph on “Peace and Freedom” to which I am responding identifies two dimensions of freedom. First is the freedom of the Church as a supra-national body under the Lordship of Christ, free from any subservience to the state or states in which its members live. Freedom from state control allows the Church to advocate and promote an ethic and even a public policy different from that which the state promotes and implements, presumably reflecting the views of “the wider society.”

Such freedom is most difficult for the Church to exercise in settings in which it is in significant ways beholden to the state. In the history of the Church this was the case for centuries in an era sometimes called “Constantinian” after the Roman emperor who in the 4th century began the process of making Christianity the state religion. That led Church leaders to articulate a theology of “just war,” permitting a “Christian” state to wage war when “necessities of state” required it. Freed from that “state church” linkage the Church today is free to advocate from the perspective of “Christ, the Prince of Peace.”

[Yoder’s book reviews the history of the Jewish faith community and cites from its theologians the conviction that the faith community was least able to influence its inherent nonviolent ethic during the times when there was a “Jewish” state under which the faith community was expected to undergird state policy, even in times of war and violence.]

The second dimension of Christian freedom is on the personal level. In Canadian history the government has always recognized the right of individuals to refuse on grounds of conscience to participate in violent action, military and other. “Conscience” has a more specifically Christian meaning in Catholic thought than it does in most other Christian communities and in society at large. Still, since military participation frequently involves violence with the intent to kill, perhaps it is right for the statement to end with freedom to refuse “particularly on questions of military involvement.”

This position opens up a larger question, as an item currently in the news indicates. Can one because of “religion and conscience” refuse to accept monogamy, as men (and presumably women) in the “Bountiful Community” seem to do in keeping with the teaching of their church?

Discussion. With respect to Christian and Jewish takes on these issues, **Luis** mentioned that he is reading a book entitled *Border Lines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity* [by Daniel Boyarin, 2004], which traces two lines of “church” from the time of the destruction of the Temple, each defining themselves in opposition to the other. Luis wondered about Yoder’s take on the Jewish invasion of Israel, recalling that the Talmid was basically pacifist, and the scene from “Fiddler on the Roof” where the protagonist responded to persecution by saying “we move.”

Doug responded to the paragraph “Peace and Mission” with the following:

He highlighted the following phrases from the section “Peace and Mission”

- Mission is essential to the nature of the church; the church brings the good news of salvation, the gospel of shalom, of peace, to the ends of the earth.

- The mission of the church is realized in its constitution of inter-ethnic communities of faith where every effort is made to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace
- The mission of the church is to proclaim the peace of Jesus Christ to the world... to women and men of good will everywhere

He then offered the following **Commentary**:

During the Advent Christmas season I had the awe-inspiring experience of singing Handel's Messiah with our church choir and orchestra. It was magical. One of the choruses is given to the angel's message of the good news of peace proclaimed to the shepherds in the fields on the outskirts of Bethlehem – “goodwill toward women and men”

- My wife Naomi and I visited these places in the Middle East a couple years ago with Gordon Matties from CMU in his Middle East study tour. So I brought back a few artifacts which illustrate “Peace and Mission”
- a kaffiyeh head-dress purchased from a Palestinian Christian shopkeeper in the Christian quarter of the old city of Jerusalem, his name is Shaban Majde.
- a Jewish prayer shawl purchased in the Jewish quarter of the old city of Jerusalem
- a Jerusalem cross made of olive wood from the west bank – reminds me of the Palestinian Christian shopkeeper in Bethlehem. His name is Majde, a brother to Shaban, the shopkeeper in the Old City
- between the Israeli world of Jerusalem and Bethlehem in the West Bank, between the world of two brothers, of two shopkeepers, stands a wall.
- A large sign posted on the Israeli side of the wall, on behalf of the ministry of tourism of Israel, greets you as leave the militarized peace and security of Israel and head into unknown corridors of Bethlehem in the Westbank – the occupied Palestinian territories. The sign reads, “May peace be with you.” In a way crossing that boundary, that barrier demonstrates what mission is about. Of making every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the true bond of peace between inter-ethnic communities of faith.
- the challenge is to find women and men of good will on both sides of the dividing wall, women and men of good will whose common commitment to the prince of peace, works toward dismantling and disarming the wall of suspicion and separation. The mission of the church is to courageously and creatively bring down the wall, and, in its place, to build a bridge of shalom, for the nations to crossover.

That is part of my vision of peace and mission in the historic touchstone between heaven and earth, Bethlehem, where Christ was born.

Discussion. Rudy recalled meeting an Arab Christian in Bethlehem who was married to an American woman. She could visit Jerusalem, but he and his children were prohibited from doing so.

Luis, responding to the paragraph “Peace and Oneness,” distributed a handout with his Observations and Reflections, and spoke to the reflections:

Unity is about Faith:

It is to believe in the Church as the Body of Christ: it is about a quality of being the Church and being in relationship:

Questions:

1. Does this flow from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic”?
2. If the four “marks” of the Church belong “together,” then what is implied if one or all are not present in ecclesial life? What does this lack of unity mean for “being of the church”?

Unity is about Love/Charity: Enacted Faith

- It is a gift of God: it is received from God as grace. We mirror the grace of God and allow ourselves to be transparent “to reflect the Triune God”
- It is a gift of God for the people of God. It involves work – and is a task – to be shared. An ethical imperative is found in Scripture:

Jn 17: 20–23: “our witness to the revelation of God in Christ is weakened when we live in disunity”

Eph. 4:3: “how can we ask the world to live in peace when we ourselves fail to heal the call ‘to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’”?

Eph. 4:5–6: “together we ask: What does it mean for the churches to confess ‘one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all?’”

Questions:

1. Are we able to recognize each other’s faith in the “one Lord, one baptism, one God and Father of us all”? By what criteria?
2. If so, then can we move forward to a more common witness in ecclesial life? (Mutual recognition of status as Christian disciples? Baptism? Peace? Etc.)

Unity as a Hope: A Striving Faith–An Eschatological Reality (beyond our work)

- “The Mennonite-Catholic report is entitled Called Together to be Peacemakers. This title stands as a hope-filled sign of the ‘unity of the Spirit’”

Questions:

1. What kind of Unity are we seeking?
2. Can we accept the “tension” to avoid spiritualizing it or making it reflect our vision/concepts of unity?

To illustrate his paragraph, Luis displayed a painting of the “Peaceable Kingdom” by Edward Hicks (1780–1849), which is supposed to illustrate the vision of Isaiah 11:6–9, which he had Joseph read for us. Luis observed that Hicks, a famous Quaker folk artist, had painted some 61 versions of this scene, which changed over time, reflecting changes in the Quaker community.

John offered the following commentary on the paragraph “Peace and Salvation.”

My items are four recent newspaper pieces first encountered over my breakfast coffee; the subject matter is the most recent conflict in the Middle East involving Israel and Gaza. How could this not catch my attention in light of the assigned reading for our meeting today?

The four articles are: 1. "Diplomatic efforts heat up as Israeli assault intensifies." Story by Patrick Martin, *Globe and Mail*, Tuesday January 6, 2009, p. A 12. 2. "The last occupied people." Commentary by Idris Elbakri, *Winnipeg Free Press*, Wednesday January 7, p. A 11. 3. "Measured action on the ground." Editorial, *Globe and Mail*, Tuesday January 6, 2009, p. A14. 4. "What is the UN waiting for? Deploy a strong force to Gaza." Commentary by Lewis MacKenzie, *Globe and Mail*, Tuesday January 6, 2009, p. A 15.

My reflection is that of a Christian journalist sitting in a shelter provided by the Israelis near the border with Gaza, behind the tanks and soldiers assembling there.

How do I understand what is happening here, what perspective makes sense, and is a peaceful outcome at all possible in the near future? As a Christian, I understand the idea of peace through the teachings, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who taught us to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek to them and pray for our persecutors. This is an echo of the Jewish Old Testament ethic as expressed, for example, by God's prophet Micah: "What does the Lord requires of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8) The life of Christ testifies to his achievement of peace among men and women of good and ill will. His example reveals, for us, a difficult, humbling exercise in reconciliation with our detractors, forgiving the enemy and the transgressor to heal the other and quell one's own tortured sentiments of resentment and revenge. In his brief public ministry, his advice to his disciples, his parables and in his crucifixion, Christ's fidelity to his teaching is utterly complete, forgiving his tormentors in his dying moments.

In his founding of the Church and his inspiration for its existence through the ages into the present, he sustains the people of God who are constituted in every age as the pilgrim community of faith, the assembly of new disciples whom he sends into the world to proclaim the peaceable kingdom under the reign of God. The Church manifests God's love for all mankind, signifies God in the world and holds the promise that the world can be made anew in the Christian commitment to love one another, selflessly. It is the practice of the peace of Christ—forgiving reconciliation—by which Christians are to be recognized. It is the peace of Christ that the Church engenders and promotes because it is the blessed instrument of saving grace.

As I listen to the barking and booming of guns, the roar of the bombers, the rattle of the tanks and the glare of the bullet traces at night, I see the world around me being remade with destruction and death and I have little if any hope that it will be Christian virtues that will bring an end to hostilities. I wonder how or whether, under the immediate circumstances, enemies can be reconciled. If the wages of sin is death,

then war must be a sin, since death has already visited both sides of the border and it appears that God has left the premises. I pray not to despair.

But the deaths in the conflict are not in equivalent proportion. The victims of the Israeli assault and invasion claim that more than 550 Gazans have been killed and 2500 injured since Israel launched its attacks on Sunday, December 28, 2008. Only four Israeli citizens have died in the last ten days from Hamas rockets. Recently, 3 Israeli soldiers were killed and 20 wounded by an Israeli tank shell “fired in error,” admitted the IDF. Is the “killing count” and degree of destruction a measure of the injustice perpetrated by one side and do such facts, assuming they could be verified, permit us, thereby, to assign blame or the greater blame? Israel’s Foreign Minister, Ms. Livni, has rejected calls for an immediate ceasefire: “We are fighting with terror and we are not reaching an agreement with terror; we will not be party to a situation in which Hamas targets Israel whenever it likes and Israel shows restraint. When Israel is being targeted, Israel is going to retaliate.” Is this not a fair perspective? Is there not a kind of logic to this argument of retaliation given sustained provocation by an enemy dedicated to the annihilation of Israel?

- However, the conditions inside Gaza appear grim, if not disastrous:
- Overwhelmed hospitals in danger of shutting down on account of no electricity
- Not enough doctors, nurses and operating rooms to handle the flow of casualties; people are dying waiting for surgery
- thousands displaced from their homes

One harsh critic of Israel's military action in the Gaza opines: “When the dust settles in Gaza, there will be swollen graveyards, debilitated hospitals and a population more driven to extremes than ever. Every household will be mourning.” I think, yes, very probably.

What has Israel’s incursion wrought? Has not the severity of its response made any way out of the conflict infinitely more difficult? Are the justifications for any of its actions compelling? One national newspaper in Canada has editorialized that “Israel’s action” is consistent with the Israeli government’s prudent, limited war aims ... Israel had no choice but to take strong deterrent and preventive action.” It says further that “a ceasefire is much to be wished for ... but it must be truly bilateral....”

Regardless of who is to be assigned blame for the current conflict, the elements that are likely necessary for a ceasefire and any attempt at addressing the aftermath are stark:

- stop Israel’s assault
 - stop Hamas’ rockets
 - open Gaza’s borders in the interests of arresting an expanding humanitarian disaster
 - close all smuggling routes into Gaza, especially the tunnels from Egypt
- involve international aid, monitoring and supervision in some effective form

On the latter element, one popular with diplomats, Lewis MacKenzie, an experienced peacekeeping soldier, has some very frank views and a proposal that clearly does not rest on any notion of reconciliation:

“The oft expressed idea of putting international monitors into the Gaza strip to control smuggling and the firing of rockets is ludicrous: Hamas would run rings around any unarmed outsiders whose only mandate was to ‘observe and report.’” I can’t help thinking that I agree with his assessment on this point. So what’s his solution and on what does it rest? Briefly it is this:

- “On their own, Israel and Hamas are doomed to a perpetual state of war no matter how much international diplomatic horsepower is applied to resolving the conflict.”
- “The Security Council needs to show some rare backbone and authorize a strong UN force under the Charter's Chapter 7, which authorizes the use of deadly force as necessary and deploy it within the Gaza strip, taking on the responsibility to provide the security to which Israel is entitled.”

Mackenzie invokes the peacekeeping force in Cyprus as a kind of model where, as a result of the UN force, there has been no fighting between Greek and Turk Cypriots since 1964. He says that the UN Security Council should be “ashamed” that it cannot devise an effective intervention in Gaza, likely because its members will not face what he believes is a very unpleasant reality: “Any idea of a ceasefire in the current fighting leading to a change in Hamas’ dedication to Israel's elimination is naive in the extreme. Any cessation of hostilities.. will be used by Hamas to enhance its weapons arsenal in preparation for the next round of terrorist attacks against its neighbour.”

So much for the reconciliation of the parties, at least in the near future, probably for longer than a generation. I ask myself several questions. Is MacKenzie’s proposal one that might just work, though born in the realpolitik of the most pessimistic assumptions about the desires of the human heart and the reach of human imagination? Could any biblical and theological rumination on the foundations of peace in the world lead us to a similar position or some accommodation to it? What do we say to and how do we act with men and women who are not of good will? Is there any Christian obligation to actively protect vulnerable peoples caught in devastating hostilities by those who would sacrifice their own people to sustain an uneven war? Can Christians who affirm Jesus’ teaching and example of non-violence contribute to the idea of an international “responsibility to protect,” without putting to risk the essential norm of non-violence and the right of conscientious objectors to participate in a war? Is a peace of non-violence and reconciliation ever to have a chance? What would a Christian peace mission to the Gaza say to Israelis and Palestinians? Would we support a ceasefire of the kind advanced by MacKenzie? Only reluctantly? And what would a Christian peace mission propose after the shooting stops? To what extent and in what manner will we, as Christians, suffer to end the suffering of others? I can’t achieve a completely satisfactory answer to these questions. Perhaps it is not possible, alone or even with only other human beings. Very possibly God is our only sure hope. Certainly we can pray for the miracle of

God's grace to end division among peoples in ways that we cannot presume to understand; for the courage to act on our Christian belief and principles and for discernment when our beliefs and ideals seem an embarrassing inconvenience. Or when our comfortable circumstances do not move us to act in ways more befitting a believer in Jesus Christ.

Discussion. **Joseph** suggested that John had come to the same conclusion he had: that the response to violence recommended by our document does not lead to a satisfactory outcome. What constitutes nonviolence? **Helmut** thought that we couldn't deal with all these questions in the time available to us; that the issue of "nonviolence" would require a book. Our document is pointing to our responsibility to de-escalate violence. He cited a rabbi who held that violence justifies violence, which was really no different than the American response to 9/11. Israel was thus justified in using violence against violence. **John** wondered if the notion of proportionality had any utility. **Adolf** cited 1 Samuel, where in response to violence against them, the Hebrews went to Samuel and demanded a king. In effect, violence doesn't work. **Luis** observed that one of the goals of the WCC's "decade to overcome violence" was to arrive at a statement about just peace, and suggested we should keep the larger perspective in mind.

Rudy presented **Henry Loewen's** reflections on the paragraph on "Nonviolence."

Henry wrote: "I believe that the writing of this document is evidence of the Holy Spirit's leading, and give thanks to God that individuals in our respective churches have discerned the Spirit's leading and have been willing to spend the energy and exercise the will to create this co-operative document. I could not have comprehended, even two decades ago, that Catholic and Mennonites would write such a document. To God be the glory.

"In the paragraph on Nonviolence, I would note that both Mennonites and Catholics believe that we should be involved, be active, in peacemaking in a nonviolent way. The paragraph also speaks about 'communal discernment.' Is it possible to envision Mennonite and Catholic communities, i.e., parishes and congregations, getting together to debate our country entering a war, or other related questions?" [Here **Rudy** interjected, as an example, the scheduled 2011 withdrawal of Canadian forces from Afghanistan.]

"The paragraph also states that 'Christian peacemaking' is carried out under the sign of the cross. Do we not also carry out 'violence' and 'war' under the sign of the cross? How can we continue the dialogue in striving for unity in this matter?"

"I would like to share my 'story' at another meeting if that is possible. I highly recommend John Paul Lederach's book, *The Moral Imagination: the Act and Soul of Building Peace*. He is one of the world's foremost experts on peacebuilding and reconciliation, and a professor of International Peacebuilding at the Joan B. Kroc Institute of Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame. His definition of Moral Imagination is: 'To imagine the responses and initiatives that, while rooted in the challenges of the real world, are by their nature capable of rising above destructive patterns and giving birth to that which does not yet exist. In reference to

peacebuilding, this is the capacity to imagine and generate constructive responses and initiatives that, while rooted in the day-to-day challenges of violent settings, transcend and ultimately break the grip of patterns and cycles.”

Rudy then displayed his symbol for the paragraph on nonviolence, a cross with chains ending in handcuffs, but set up to cast no shadow (thus a symbol of the Resurrection). He sees it as a symbol of our being released from prejudices, from taking sides in violent situations, as in the present Israeli invasion of Gaza.

Viola offered the following reflections on the paragraph on “Forgiveness”:

Well said! This section could be strengthened with a sentence or two about the connection between forgiveness and reconciliation.

Forgiveness is a vital element of the Christian life because love is the core and foundation of the Christian Faith. Forgiveness is the essential dynamic for maintaining relationships; a healthy relationship within oneself, a meaningful relationship with God, caring relationships within the family, as well as sustaining relationships among or between groups, communities and nations.

However forgiveness is hard. It is a challenge and often a struggle. Anyone who lives in family, has raised teenagers, drives a car or is aware of all the injustices in the world knows the struggle of forgiveness. When I asked a Christian friend of mine, to respond to the word forgiveness she related the estrangement in three families she is related to. She commented, “They have a lot of trouble with forgiveness.” Don’t we all! Anger, resentment and revenge lie very close to the surface. Sadly, in recent times pop culture promotes violence as the only solution to problem solving.

The churches’ teaching, preaching, and promoting forgiveness is a strong counter culture voice. The Amish response to the murders in their community, the lower divorce rate among devout couples, and the Catholic and Mennonite churches’ role in reintegrating guerrillas into society in Colombia come to mind, as just a few examples.

When I Googled ‘forgiveness’ the collection indicated 17.3 million entries. Eight related searches were suggested: forgiveness quotes, forgiveness stories, forgiveness poems, forgiveness movies, forgiveness Bible, forgiveness in Christianity, forgiveness in Islam, and God forgiveness. Requesting “forgiveness in Judaism” yielded 465 entries.

The extent of the material out there shows what a simple yet complex, personal yet vast, and straight forward yet challenging a concept forgiveness is! Ultimately forgiveness is a choice which heals the forgiver and ideally reconciles victim and offender as well as witnessing to others.

Viola showed us wedding photos (of her parents and of her daughter) as symbols of forgiveness.

Janet offered the following reflections on the paragraph on “Truthfulness”:

- I liked “Just as peace requires justice, genuine reconciliation requires truthfulness.”
- It is a “process of healing, purification and repentance.”... and I would add, personal conversion.

Where there has been an action without honesty – the result is disorder, chaos, mistrust, greater confusion and personal deterioration. People suffocate in false truths.

- A lack of truth does violence to the heart.
- People die inside when they aren’t told the truth – the false self grows and the true self dies.
- As hard as it is for people to give or receive the truth – it’s needed and what is lacking in society, in the family, in our religious and church communities.
- The question I hear most is “Why” because truth wasn’t provided they question themselves and often times in error.
- Everyone needs someone to speak truth to them (spouse, friend, parent)
- Truth hurts (it pinches our ego) but there is greater pain in not hearing the truth.
- We are afraid to tell the truth – white lies are more acceptable.
- Fear prevents living in truth.
- If I admit a truth I do not want to accept, there is fear of losing something.
- In my experience, that even if I want someone to tell me the truth – I resist it. When I have heard honestly the truth, I have a conversion experience and I am able to live in the awareness of that truth.
- It is the same for both the Church and personal perspective: we all think we have the truth – Each side thinks they are right – our challenge to see the others perspective
- to be open to their truth.
- Somewhere in between my truth and your truth is God’s Truth.

Meeting in an ecumenical dialogue forces us to look at ourselves in truth, and helps to see others’ truth.

- Awareness is the key.

As a symbol of the paragraph on truthfulness, Janet displayed an icon of a Peace Angel, with the image composed of texts relating to peace, and gave everyone a small prayer card with the same image, another image of Mary and Jesus, and the prayer of St. Francis for peace. Here are some of the texts from the Peace Angel:

- **Peace Angel** – her message for us: 1. Blessed are the Peacemakers. 2. Peace be within thy walls. 3. Peace on Earth Good will to men (all). 4. His peace on all the peaks. 5. Guide our feet in the way of peace. 6. Righteousness and Peace have kissed each other. 6. Carry gentle, carry peace.
6. **Next meeting.** The next meeting was scheduled for Tuesday, 26 May, 4 to 9 pm, at a Mennonite venue (to be announced).

7. **Closing Prayer.** Each participant offered the prayer that he or she had composed in response to their assigned paragraph, with the sung refrain “God is with us” between each prayer.