

Minutes

Winnipeg Mennonite-Catholic Dialogue, Meeting No. 31

Meeting held on 14 October 2010
at St. John Brebeuf Church

Present: Adolf Ens, Dora Dueck (until supper), Helmut Harder, Janet Kozak, Joseph Langan, Richard Lebrun, Henry Loewen, John Long, Luis Melo, and Ron Penner. Guest: Joe McClellan

1. **Welcome and opening prayer.**

2. **Personal sharing.**

[Your not so faithful secretary, confused about the time of the meeting, did not arrive until around 5:30 pm, so missed most of this sharing.

John did provide me with notes that he had prepared, which described a summer trip to India with Fr Dave Creamer and a group of students. For John and his wife this was not a direct ecumenical encounter, but indirect impressions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, even Indian Christianity, and especially Indian Anglicanism in its historical expression. These impressions were disturbing rather than comforting. The frequent, sometimes unrelenting, displays of public piety and religiosity were sometimes off-putting, and usually baffling. The most moving religious and spiritual experience was the volunteer time with the Loreto Day School Sealdah and Mother Teresa's sisters, the Missionaries of Charity, both on Bose Road in Kolkata. RL]

3. **Reports on attendance at ecumenical gatherings.**

- a) **Helmut** reported on a Symposium on ecumenical dialogues that he attended in St. Paul, MN, June 17–19. He was very impressed with how well the event was organized (by Mgr John Radano, who had just published a book on Catholic-Lutheran dialogue). There were about 40 people in attendance (representing a variety of church groups, including the Orthodox), and 15 presented papers (made available beforehand). Helmut's paper presented an assessment of the International Mennonite-Catholic dialogue (1998–2003), and discussed projections for the future of this dialogue. He was most impressed with the changes that have occurred in the way which different groups view each other. Apart from the official program, he enjoyed an informal "off-campus" dinner with five other conference participants, which included a very rich discussion of "death and dying."
- b) At the end of July, Helmut attended a Peace among the Peoples conference in Elkhart, Indiana, jointly sponsored by the Elkhart seminary and Notre Dame University, with a number of big-name American theologians (including Stanley Hauerwas) in attendance. Questions explored included "peace church," and "peace-making churches" and the "pacifist – just war debate." Helmut saw evidence old barriers are breaking down; even

with differences, all seem to be able to work together. For example, Mennonites, now entering more into the “public square,” are learning to be comfortable with those with different viewpoints – oneness in Christ trumping other issues, as people find ways to talk about a middle ground between pacifism and just war theory.

- c) In November, Helmut and Irma will be going to Calgary to speak at the Foothills Mennonite Church about ecumenical peace and Mennonite-Catholic dialogue, as well as making a presentation on “walking through the valley of the shadow of death.”

5. **Supper break**

6. **Continuation of reports on ecumenical gatherings**

- a) **Luis** distributed and spoke to a list of “highlights and updates” of his ecumenical and interreligious activities.
 - i) Synod of Bishops in the Middle East. Luis called attention to this event (and a Vatican press release about the event).
 - ii) Naming of the Swiss bishop, Kurt Koch, to replace Cardinal Kasper as head of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Luis saw this appointment as a very positive development. He has experience working with the Orthodox.
 - iii) Visit to the Anglican Communion Office (London). Luis noted that while the canons of the Anglican Church with respect to gays and gay marriage have not changed, there is nothing to prevent local bishops and pastors from blessing such unions, so that at the local level great diversity is developing.
 - iv) Joint Working Group 2010 Syria. Luis spoke to the distributed Communiqué and his experience of this meeting. He was particularly impressed with the interfaith interactions with Muslims in the region (e.g., a ceremony in the Grand Mosque of Damascus with the three patriarchs at a shrine to St. John the Baptist).
 - v) Mennonite-Catholic International Dialogue: Second Round. He noted that there will be a preparatory meeting in January 2011, with the dialogue to begin in late 2011 or spring 2012, this time including Lutherans, with Baptism being the topic to be explored.

5. **Discussion of *The Naked Anabaptist* by Stuart Murray.**

Helmut provided some background on this book, reporting a talk with Alan Kreider, who was involved in the London Mennonite Centre (the result of missionary activity in England by Mennonites from North America) at the time Stuart Murray was attracted to Anabaptism. The interest in Anabaptism that has developed in England and Ireland appears related to people in England wanting to rethink the legacy of Christendom, where many people are

disillusioned with the established state church in England. It was visits to varied Anabaptist communities in North America (Amish, Mennonites, etc.) that let Murray to wonder about what might be left (a “naked” Anabaptist) without the overlay of various cultures embodied in various existing “Anabaptist” churches today. Generally “Anabaptists” are not a church (though in Holland their Dutch name means “baptism-minded”), and the World Mennonite Federation includes churches that do not have “Mennonite” in their name, such as the Brethren of Christ. Although the term “Anabaptist” started out as a term of derision (in part to condemn them under an old Roman Law that made “rebaptizers” subject to the death penalty), in more recent times it has taken on a positive connotation among this family of churches. Helmut also cited a World Mennonite Conference pamphlet that lists “core convictions” of Anabaptists, a list close to the list Murray offers in his book, and that provides membership and conference statistics world-wide. He concluded by observing that as used by Murray and others, Anabaptism seems more a movement than a church. Helmut then gave each participant in our dialogue an opportunity to give his/her general impression of the book.

Richard began by saying that he was so impressed with the book that he had persuaded the “other” local dialogue group (between faculty of CMU and St. Paul’s College) to use it as the basis of discussion for their two fall term meetings. He particularly liked Murray’s general approach, offering the seven identified “core convictions” as gifts to other Christian communities for their use in dealing with the situation in which Christian churches generally find themselves in the twenty-first century.

Janet said she enjoyed the book and learned a lot. It was a real “eye-opener” especially with respect to how culture and religion can become so intertwined, an issue that Ukrainian Catholics are also having to deal with.

Henry found the book offered a broad swath of history, but that it rather vainly tried to describe something that doesn’t exist, a “naked” Anabaptist.

Ron thought the book was useful for Mennonites in southern Manitoba where there is so much intermingling of culture and faith, and where people need to come to grips with the essentials of their beliefs.

John described the book as “a very literate presentation of a provocative, yet persuasive thesis: ‘whatever its deficiencies, the Anabaptist tradition offers a place of belonging, and a source of inspiration for Christians today as we face the challenges of the long-dominant forms of institutional Christianity are declining and struggling’ (Murray, p. 168). He was intrigued by Murray’s central critique of Western Christendom, that it had “seriously distorted the gospel, marginalized Jesus, and left the churches ill-equipped for mission in a post-Christian culture” (Murray, p. 45). Murray put the Catholic Church under a critical microscope; he describes some serious difficulties, yet offers some challenging ways of remedy for brave, thoughtful Catholics. John could not image why serious, practicing Catholics could not or would not join in affirming Murray’s seven Core Convictions.

Luis described reading the book as a worthwhile exercise, and thought Murray raised a number of important questions. But he had some difficulty with Murray's use of the term Christendom. He wondered if there is anything in Mennonite culture that could be considered "Christendom." What do you do when a majority of the population are Christians?

Helmut recalled growing up, attending high school, and teaching in the Mennonite community in southern Ontario. He spoke as well of the influence that Harold Bender, a Swiss Mennonite, and his 1944 book *The Anabaptist Vision* had on him. Bender had, in a sense recovered the "naked" Anabaptist by going back to the 16th century sources of the Anabaptist movement.

Adolf [Here I am inserting notes that Adolf sent me; my own notes on his presentation are sketchy and almost illegible, and his are quite clear and, as I remember, he covered most of these points in his oral comments. RL]

While neither the title nor sub-title says so, this book is about 16th century Anabaptism and 21st century Anabaptism. Murray reverses the historical order by waiting until Chapter 7 for his concise survey of "original Anabaptists," but draws on that background throughout the earlier chapters.

The version of present-day Anabaptism discussed in the earlier chapters is a seven-point statement of "Anabaptist Core Convictions" put together by the "Anabaptist Network in Britain and Ireland." The thesis underlying those core convictions is that the Christendom era is ending and that its demise is cause for celebration (as well as regret).

I put the "regret" part in parentheses because, while mentioning it, the book leans heavily in the direction of celebrating it as a kind of liberation of the church. Christendom, according to Murray, "marginalized Jesus" and "seriously distorted the gospel."

That the impact of the end of Christendom is obviously felt much more keenly in Europe and Britain than elsewhere in the Christian church is not a surprise. Christendom was a European phenomenon although in some parts of the Americas there were attempts to transplant it. In a sense then, this book is not nearly as much for us as it is for Europeans.

Nevertheless, since most of the churches in North America are European transplants, the bringing together of a series of core convictions about gospel and church may well be of help to the many in our region who are looking for greater relevance of their faith than what they find in the offering of the institutional church.

The areas in which the ending of the Christendom era signals discontinuity, include points of significant change in how we understand church. If the book stimulates serious discussion and new biblical study that change may move in the direction of greater faithfulness.

Murray's study almost entirely ignores the non-western church (in Asia, Africa and Latin America), the church of the majority of Christians since some time in the last century. (There

is a passing reference to the base Christian communities in Brazil as a part of liberation theology. 65) In a way it is understandable for Murray not to include “Anabaptist” movements among those churches, since they did not experience most of the symptoms of Christendom. But to round out a 21st century version of “Core Anabaptist Convictions” it seems like a serious omission.

Ron, reflecting on the supposedly close connection between culture and religion in traditional Mennonite congregations, observed that there is, in fact, a diversity of cultures present in one of the congregations he has worked with. It included Africans, southern Manitoba Mennonites, and Canadian aboriginals, who have to ask what is the essence of their new faith? Murray’s book is very useful to people like this who are wondering what it means to be Mennonite.

Helmut noted that in his own congregation the reason for some members leaving their congregation from time to time had to do with the what Murray identifies as Core Conviction 6, “Spirituality and economics are interconnected.”

There followed a long discussion about the many different dimensions and aspects of the relationship between culture and religion, the inescapability of living in some culture, history and culture, the implications of living as we do in a pluralistic society, and the continuing need to re-evaluate our traditions, discerning what needs to be retained and what can be dropped.

Joseph noted that Murray didn’t seem to have much to say about prayer, but others suggested that he simply took prayer and worship for granted. **Helmut** said that for Mennonites prayer and withdrawal fit into the rhythm of life, but that this did not constitute a vocation (like a monastic vocation). These considerations led to discussion on various types of spirituality, such as monastic (praying for the world) and Ignatian, which called for active presence in the world. **John** quoted a prayer by Mother Teresa that revealed her belief about the relationship between silence, prayer, and love.

Ron asked whether we thought our “post-Christendom” situation was a good thing or a bad thing, observing that many in evangelical circles speak about the need to “Christianize” the institutions of government. **John** responded with St. Francis’s admonition that if you want to save the world, change yourself. **Richard** thought that many are too hung up on symbols (e.g., the American Right and its insistence things like coinage bearing the statement “In God we Trust.”) He suggested attempts to define America as “a Christian nation” were misguided in our pluralist society, and that what was more important were efforts to implement social justice. **Helmut** suggested that what we see in countries like England and Germany are secular cultures, in fact, “post-Christian” societies. **Luis** referred to some of the absurdities of a state church in England, where anyone (even a Muslim) can walk into an Anglican church and demand to be baptized. Such an established church no longer has credibility. For similar reasons, **Joe** objected to flags in churches, and to Christian symbols in public offices. **Ron** voiced his frustration at the commitment of many Mennonites in southern Manitoba to the Conservative Party and its emphasis on military spending, prison building, and getting

“tough” with criminals.

Luis noted that for many Catholics the Second Vatican Council, by getting rid of a lot of “baroque” stuff, moved in the direction of a much more “naked” Catholic. **Helmut**, in this context, thought the thrust of Murray’s book pushed towards getting back to the essentials and getting rid of the clutter. He suggested as well that Anabaptist-Mennonite thinking in some of these areas has been influencing Catholics, as witnessed by the document *Called Together to be Peacemakers*. **Janet** said that in reading Murray she kept translating what he was saying to her experience as a Ukrainian Catholic – and asking herself how much is really “credal”? **Joseph** recounted an experience of All Souls All Saints celebrations in Croatia where he observed huge numbers of people going to cemeteries to put candles on the graves of loved ones. Obviously something cultural, not essential, but not negative. **Luis** observed that Catholics often shy away from definitions, taking the stance that “everyone belongs,” with generally widely-set boundaries.

John, suggesting that Murray over-emphasizes the flaws of Christendom, found it odd that he never mentions St. Francis of Assisi. **Adolf** pointed out how threatening the early Anabaptists appeared to Christendom, and that they were, in effect, pushed out, and that Luther, who found state and military backing, retained the institutions of Christendom, while the Anabaptists rejected any affiliation with the state. **Helmut** was not sure how Mennonites could define church; that there is in Mennonite ecclesiology a broadness that is non-discriminatory. This led **Luis** to ask how Mennonites deal with diversity, to which **Helmut** replied by admonishment, and that, of course, people have the freedom to leave. On the other hand, it is understood that following Christ entails participation in the Body of Christ, the church.

6. **Next meeting.** **Helmut** reminded us that we have now completed the three additional years that we had agreed to. **Luis** wondered how many in the group would be ready to commit to another three years of dialogue. Some said they would like think about this proposal and get back to either Luis or Helmut. In the light of Lutherans being added to the new international dialogue, there was discussion of adding Lutherans to our own dialogue, but it appeared that this might complicate matters too much. **Luis** suggested that at the next meeting we might want to discuss an article by Drew Christiansen, “The Ethics of Peacemaking: The Genesis of *Called Together to be Peacemakers*—Report of the International Mennonite-Catholic Dialogue (2004),” which he had distributed earlier in the meeting. **John** suggested we might add to this our own statement following our discussion of this document. In the end it was left to **Luis** and **Helmut** to devise an agenda for our next meeting, scheduled for 27 January (alternatively for 26 January), at Fort Garry Mennonite Church in conjunction with the Week for Christian Unity prayer service to be held there.
7. **Ron** offered a closing prayer, and **Helmut** thanked **Joe** for the hospitality of St. John Brebeuf parish in hosting our meeting.