

Minutes

Winnipeg Mennonite-Catholic Dialogue, Meeting No. 34

Meeting held on 28 September 2011
at Trinity Lutheran Church

Present: Tom Bailey-Robertson, Paul Doerksen, Dora Dueck, Helmut Harder, Melanie Kampen, Victor Kliewer, Richard Lebrun, John Long, Luis Melo, Ron Penner, Donna Peters-Small, Lynda Trenholm, and Nancy Wood.

Regrets: Michelle Gallant

1. Welcome to the two new people: **Melanie Kampen** and **Tom Bailey-Robertson**.
2. Welcome to the Trinity Place by **Ron Penner**. He told us that supper was being prepared by Duane Penner, his son. Introduction of **Rev Ron Nelson**. Aberdeen Evangelical Mennonite has been meeting in this venue for some years.
3. **Devotional Opening – Pastor Ron Nelson**, Trinity Lutheran Church.

Ron began by leading us in song from the “Blue Book Hymnal: “You have come down to the lakeshore,” followed by a reading from Luke 9:57–62. Then in a talk explaining why this church is here and why it is still here in this part of the city, Ron shared his personal biography with us. After a varied career in the U.S. and Canada, he accepted an assignment to Trinity Lutheran in 1999, at time when thought was being given to selling the facility. There were no interested buyers. Eventually, by hosting various programs and an invitation to Aberdeen Mennonite Church to share use of facility, Trinity Lutheran continues, with a congregation that is the second oldest Lutheran congregation in Winnipeg (dating from 1892. Other who use the facility are the First Nations Family Worship Centre, Healthy Living – Healthy Eating, Healthy Start for Mom and Me, House of Prayer, Secret Place Ministry, Trinity Food Pantry, and Urban Plunge. All work together to provide programs for and with the North End community. Ron then led us in another hymn, “All Are Welcome,” and then led us on a tour of the facility.

4. **Introductions:** For sake of the newcomers, **Helmut** invited all participants to introduce themselves. **Richard Lebrun**, a retired history professor (St. Paul’s College), and an original member of this group, remains active in various church activities (especially involved in efforts at reform) and in St. Ignatius parish. He and his wife have six children, nine grand children (plus four living step-grandchildren), and seven great-grandchildren (which leads his oldest grandson to dub him “the patriarch”). **Tom Bailey-Robertson** identified himself as a native Winnipegger, who has completed a Master of Divinity at the University of Notre Dame, married a Winnipeg girl, and is now working as a pastoral associate at St. John Brebeuf parish. **Donna Peters-Small**, who described herself as a former Catholic, now a Mennonite (for 30 years), works as a guidance counsellor at Mennonite Collegiate. She is the mother of two children and worships Fort Garry Mennonite Fellowship. **Melanie Kampen**, a

student at CMU, plans to continue her studies at Notre Dame University. She worships at Springfield Heights Mennonite. **Victor Kliewer**, a retired pastor, recently completed a master's thesis on Mennonite history. **John Long**, a retired University of Manitoba education professor, has three grown children, and one grandchild who he babysits. He worships at Mary Mother of the Church, and has been involved in this group since the beginning. **Ron Penner**, with his wife Ruth, pastors Aberdeen Evangelical Mennonite Church (a post-retirement appointment). They have three married children, plus nine grandchildren. **Dora Dueck** is a writer and editor who works from home. She worships at Jubilee Mennonite Church, and has three children and six grandchildren. **Nancy Wood**, a former Mennonite who became a Catholic, with her husband Ted, are members of the Chemin Neuf community, and are working at the Charleswood Retreat Centre. **Lynda Trenholm** is a pastoral associate at St. Bernadette's parish in Windsor Park. She and her husband Gord have two grown children, and a two-year old granddaughter, and are expecting a second grandchild. She worships at Christ the King parish, where she used to work as a pastoral assistant. Most recently she has been busy as the chair of divine worship committee for Archdiocese of St. Boniface, organizing a workshop on new translation of the Roman missal. **Luis Melo**, a Marianist priest, works an ecumenical officer for the Archdiocese of St. Boniface, and also teaches at various times at St. Paul's College, CMU, and the University of Winnipeg. **Helmut Harder**, born in Winnipeg, grew up in southern Ontario, and come back to Winnipeg to teach CMBC, and then became an executive of Mennonite Church Canada. After meeting Luis, they ended up setting up this local C-M dialogue in 1999. Both had been going to various dialogue meetings and concluded that something should be done in Winnipeg. The resultant Winnipeg Mennonite-Catholic dialogue group has given birth to other dialogue groups in the city and news of these activities have been spread in the world by Mgr. John Radano, who was the co-chair of the international Mennonite-Catholic dialogue. Helmut is married to Irma, a musician; though retired, both stay very active. They have three children (one deceased) and grandsons. They are members of Charleswood Mennonite Church.

5. **Supper.** Prayer led by **Ron Penner**.

6. **Sharing of ecumenical experiences**

Helmut reported than in July, he had attended a conference Summer Ecumenical Institute in Saskatoon, on topic Acting Together, From Dialogue to Common Mission. He gave a Friday evening talk on The Future Ecumenism in Canada, Challenges and Opportunities. The talk is to be published, and Helmut promised he would send it to us. Helmut also drew our attention to a new book by former CMU student now teaching at Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo, ON, Jeremy Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance: Churches Confront Their Sinful Pasts*, which Helmut will be reviewing for the Mennonite Quarterly Review.

Luis distributed a long list of his recent ecumenical and interreligious activities (most undertaken in his role in the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs for the Archdiocese of Saint Boniface). He highlighted trips to Rome, London, and San Francisco, and his upcoming involvement in the annual meeting of the Joint Working Group of the World Council of Churches in Malta. He noted that his activities were

moving more into interfaith (as opposed to ecumenical) activities. He also spoke briefly about his presentations/workshops on Catholic Principles of Ecumenism to Adults in the Winnipeg Pastoral Zone (Lac du Bonnet, Sept. 22 and 29.) and his involvement with the Selection Committee for the Annual Lieutenant Governor General's Interfaith. He called attention as well the Annual General Meeting/Conference of the Western Diocesan/Eparchial Coordinators of Ecumenism on theme of Catholic-Jewish Relations to be held at the St. Benedict's Retreat Centre, November 18–19. This includes a public event, a panel presentation, "God's will for Jewish-Catholic Relations" to be held at Sharrey Zedek Synagogue on the Friday evening.

Lynda spoke about an ecumenical memorial/funeral service she recently organized for an aunt, who died 36 years ago. The aunt and her mother were orphans who came from England to Canada while quite young. In conversation with a cousin, Lynda discovered that the aunt's remains (ashes) were being kept in someone's house—and consequently organized the service, where she had the opportunity to meet lots of cousins and other family members. She and her husband will be leaving soon for a pilgrimage to Greece.

Nancy reported on developments at the retreat centre in St. Charles (gifted to their Chemin Neuf group by the nuns), where many non-Catholic groups are booking retreats. The plan to use the centre as a kind of ecumenical student residence has not worked out for the current year,

Dora described a Mennonite heritage tour she had taken with her husband to northern Germany and Poland, where they visited many churches where Mennonites used to worship, now still used for worship. She was particularly taken by a visit to the shrine of the Black Madonna in Poland, where they heard a visiting German group singing in four-part harmony (and sounding like Mennonites!). She also described seeing remarkable stations of the cross in a Polish church in the form of paintings referring to contemporary Polish life.

John said that he had nothing "official" to report, but that he was still meeting with a Baptist minister friend for long conversations on religious and theological matters.

Ron reminded us that for him and his wife something ecumenical happens every week when their Aberdeen Mennonite Church worships in the facilities of Trinity Lutheran Church. He also mentioned attending an Evangelical Mennonite Conference in Calgary, which in the last twenty-five years has become much more diversified, with three languages (English, Low German, and Spanish) in evidence at the conference. Ron also distributed copies of the *Christian Week* to those of us who were interested in this publication.

Victor reported that in May he and his wife had participated in a Kentucky Holy Land tour, which included visits to Benedictine and Trappist monasteries, a convent of the Sisters of Lorreto, the remains of a Shaker village, and the Mennonite seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. Currently he is enrolled in a course at the University of Winnipeg on

Jewish-Christian relations (up to 1939, it includes the impact of the Enlightenment on Jewish communities).

Melanie spoke of her involvement in “partnership circles” in Winnipeg and northern Manitoba (mostly involving native and Métis people).

Donna reported a return visit to Glide Memorial church in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco (great choir), attendance at a Latin Mass at St. Anne’s Church in Winnipeg (a very emotional event for her), and services at Southland Church in Steinbach (not so positive). As a counsellor at Westgate Collegiate, which has a number of non-Mennonite students, she finds herself involved in many interesting discussions. She noted that her congregation (Fort Garry Mennonite Fellowship), through sponsoring families from French-speaking Africa and South America (Spanish-speaking folks), has found itself pushed in new directions. Many from these sponsored groups are now participating in the life of the congregation.

Tom reported working a couple times a month at the Booth Centre, a Salvation Army Haven for people recovering from mental illness, as well as some involvement at the Spiritual Care department of the Health Science Centre.

Richard reported attendance at two lay-organized Catholic reform meetings that drew the ire of the local Catholic bishops: the American Catholic Council in Detroit in June, which featured Hans Kung (by video), and addresses by Dr Anthony Padovano, James Carroll, and Matthew Fox; and a Synod the Baptized organized by the Catholic Coalition for Church Reform in the Twin Cities, which is organizing a representative Council of the Baptized that will attempt to recommend actions to an unsympathetic archbishop. Coming and going to Minneapolis, he visited his favourite bookstore at St. John’s University (his alma mater) and picked up some interesting new volumes, including *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: Questions for the Church in Our time* by Gerard Mannion, which makes a cogent argument for the imperative for dialogue within the Church, between Christian churches, and with non-Christian faiths.

Luis concluded this portion of the meeting by drawing our attention to *Healing of Memories, Reconciling in Christ: Reconciling in Christ: A Lutheran-Mennonite Study Guide for Congregations*, available both on the internet and as published resource.

7. **Focus on the Beatitudes** – personal reflection and discussion.

Helmut began by providing background on the choice of the topic, explaining how and why he and Luis came to idea of studying a particular Bible passage together in our group. He also pointed out, that given the number of participants, each person should limit their presentation to about seven minutes.

Luis spoke briefly to a packet of materials about the Beatitudes that he had prepared for us, highlighting a list of recommended books, opportunities for Catholics (of both the East and the West) to learn about the Beatitudes through the liturgical life of the Church,

in both song and lectionary readings, and a brief review of traditional Catholic understanding and presentation of the Beatitudes. His conclusions (on p. 3 of the handout) focused on Matthew's eschatological and moral viewpoint, in contrast to Luke who leans more on its present and social aspects. For Matthew, the Church lives in a messianic age, the end times. For himself, living in his religious community, Luis finds himself particularly focused on the Beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart."

John Long spoke to notes that he distributed to us. The notes included comments about the words used: "Blessed," from the Greek *markarios*, meaning "fortunate"; "beatitude," from the Latin *beatitudo*, a noun meaning blessedness. The terms were used in the OT.

All Christian denominations contend that the Beatitudes are the heart of Jesus' teachings. Additionally, it is suggested that they are widely felt to be so crucial because they address a key problem of human existence—suffering. They address the question: What is God going to do about suffering, promising certain blessings for certain classes of people and behaviours. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is cited to the same point. John noted that there are certain questions and controversies surround the Beatitudes, but he did not explore these. He also provided a short bibliography of sources, including a film (Jesus of Nazareth by Franco Zeffirelli).

He said he was particularly attracted to Blessed are the Poor because of its continuing significance to contemporary society, and but thought that Blessed are the Peacemakers is the most challenging for Christians, given that war remains one of the greatest sources of suffering in today's world.

He concluded by suggesting that any and all forms of common witness would be good thing for our churches.

Melanie offered these comments and reflections:

Growing up attending Sunday school, we were encouraged to memorize Scripture, usually one verse each week. If we memorized it we would receive some little reward like a sticker or a piece of candy. This was never really any incentive for me to memorize the verses. I simply did not like memorizing things. There was one verse, however, that struck me the first time we read it. This verse would be the first and only Bible verse I ever memorized throughout my elementary years. It was from Matthew 5:9: "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God." Something about this struck a chord with me. I was compelled by the idea that I could follow Jesus by being a peacemaker. I considered myself a peacemaker, in the schoolyard during recess for instance, volunteering as a conflict manager on the playground in grades 5 and 6. I didn't like conflict, and I saw it as my responsibility to help my peers make peace between each other again.

My theology or vision of peace has grown and complexified since then. I no longer understand the world to be black and white, where conflict is bad or sinful as such, and peace is always good and desirable as such. There is always more going on than meets

the eye. I have more questions than answers now than I did when I was a child. (I was one of those kids who had all the answers to everyone's questions).

Considering those experiences growing up, you might think that I am most strongly drawn to the seventh Beatitude. And when I first received these reflection questions, I thought that would certainly be my choice. My choice changed. As I reflected on recent experiences with a Metis fishing community in northern Manitoba, and my time spent teaching English in Cairo, (two experiences that I would call ecumenical) it became apparent that one of the other Beatitudes expressed more accurately, more vividly, what the image of the peacemaker had signified for me. Matthew 5:6 reads: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

I have come to understand this word righteousness, *diakosune* in Greek, in its multi-dimensional use throughout the Greek philosophical texts, the Old Testament, and the Pauline letters. In Plato's *Republic*, for example, the word *diakosune* is rendered as justice and represents one of the four cardinal virtues. In the Old Testament *diakosune* is roughly equivalent to the Hebrew adjective *saddik*, and the noun *sedhek* or *sedhaka*, which is most commonly translated as righteous or righteousness. Its importance in the Old Testament is its reference to Israel's covenant relationship with Yahweh. The most frequent use of the term is by St. Paul. For the most part, St. Paul draws from the Hebrew theological use of the word as pertaining to upholding the expectations of a relationship, in particular the covenant relationship God made with the people of Israel, but also relationships between people within that nation. Since righteousness is defined as fulfilling the demands of the covenant, which no one can accomplish, it is only through Jesus that the covenant can be fulfilled and the people of God can be made righteous (Rom. 5:9; 1 Cor. 1:30, 6:11).

Let us return to the Beatitude. The hunger and thirsting for righteousness, that Jesus describes, for right relationship with God and with our neighbours and enemies, for justice, is experienced across the globe. Especially when it comes to zones of deep-rooted and violent conflicts, and trying to build peace, in trying to imagine something different, something better, one can quickly become overwhelmed and paralyzed by the planetary scope of work to be done. Where does one being? A passage from Isaiah 58 has continuously put my feet back on the ground in times like those; back in a particular place with particular people. Beginning at verse 6: [read from NIV]

The images here are powerful and captivating. They are images of journeying into places of darkness, into risky situations, into parched and hopeless lands, only to find that this is precisely where and when one is met with light, with springs of water, and with healing. In other words, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for justice, will find themselves satiated in God's abundant faithfulness. This is the image of the peacemaker for me. I am someone who hungers and thirsts for justice, and sometimes, often when I least expect it, I find myself filled.

Lynda offered the following comments and reflections on the Beatitudes:

If I remember correctly the first time I heard the Beatitudes proclaimed was in church during a Sunday Liturgy. It was the passage from Matthew. I wasn't very old as I recall – a preschooler. I remember thinking about the word “Blessed” and wondering to whom Jesus was referring. The only blessed person who I knew about was the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus. I wondered if it would ever be possible for me or for that matter anyone I knew to be blessed like Mary. It was a puzzling question.

As I grew older and attended Catholic school, I learned what it meant to be blessed. I was very fortunate to be taught by some wonderful teachers, mostly sisters, who I thought were definitely blessed. They were kind, compassionate, loving, and caring. I enjoyed spending time with them. They were women whom I admired greatly. Certainly, they discovered that I had been blessed with a beautiful voice and they encouraged me to use my gift for the glory of God. So they asked my parents if they could teach me to sing the Latin responses in order to help them sing at funerals. I spent many recesses and lunch hours practising Gregorian chant with them in church. These were blessed times of prayer for me and the sisters. I suppose it was in those early years that I realized that I was being called into discipleship and into bereavement ministry. “Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.” The sisters helped me to understand the importance and the meaning of this beatitude in more ways than one. When I was ten years old my mother gave birth to stillborn baby boy. I was devastated. I went school that day and broke into tears as we started our morning prayer. My teacher put her arms around as I sobbed. She told the class to take out their books and read. Sister took me into the church, held me in her arms and waited patiently until I was able to tell her what was wrong. I will never forget that day and the feeling of comfort that I received.

This was not my first experience of loss. I was five years old when my first cousin died of cancer. She was a year younger than me. It was a very sad and perplexing time for my extended family. Everyone was filled with a myriad of emotions because my younger brother was born on the day Patti died. Tears of sorrow and tears of joy flowed abundantly. I guess that's why I was attracted Matthew's second beatitude, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted,” and Luke's third beatitude “Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.”

I picked up a couple of books on the “Beatitudes” which gave me more insights and understanding. They are: *Finding Joy & Peace – Living the Beatitudes Every Day* by Marilyn Gustin and *Beatitudes – Eight Steps to Happiness* by Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa.

Finding Joy & Peace invites you (the reader) to take a look at life as viewed in the Beatitudes. Bestselling author Marilyn Gustin shows us how the sayings of Jesus offer a practical pattern for personal happiness now more than ever.

“Rather than focussing on today's ‘me, me, me’ ideology, this book advises us to stop, be silent and listen to what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount and that blessedness is available to anyone, anywhere, at any time. The Beatitudes are a springboard to true bliss

and heaven on earth.” (back cover)

“Father Raniero Cantalamessa will lead you (the reader) not only to a deeper appreciation of these famous words of Jesus, but also into the presence of Jesus himself who lived them perfectly and who will give you the ability and enthusiasm to do the same.” (back cover)

As I indicated previously, I am particularly attracted to the Beatitude about those who mourn and weep. Why? There has been much loss in my life and in lives of many people who have crossed my path. In my work as a Pastoral Associate much of my ministry is comforting those who mourn. I try to the best of my ability to bring the healing touch of Christ to these individuals so they might one day laugh again.

The Beatitude which really poses a challenge/problem for me and for the Church today is “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” Raniero Cantalamessa opens his treatise on this beatitude by asking a crucial question “Who are the Peacemakers?” He indicates that the “word “*eirinopoioi*” means “those who work for peace, who make peace.” Certainly, I believe that peace is something that our world needs but it seems forever elusive. Cantalamessa stresses that “peacemakers are people who love peace so much that they are not afraid of compromising their own peace by intervening in conflicts to procure peace among those in dissension.” He further suggests that “peacemakers” is not synonymous with “peaceful people” who avoid conflict as much as possible, nor is it a synonym for pacifists, if by pacifists we mean those who side against war (most often against one of the contenders in the war!) without doing anything to reconcile the warring factions with each other.” In Jesus’ time peace in the known world was attained by winning battles, victory by annihilation. The question that begs to be asked is where is Christ in all of this?

Cantalamessa offers this explanation. “Some have thought that the gospel beatitude is meant to counter this interpretation and offer a different explanation of who the real peacemakers are and how peace gets promoted: through victories, yes, but victories over oneself, not over one’s enemies, not by destroying the enemy but by destroying hostility itself, as Jesus did on the cross. However the prevailing opinion today is that understanding of this beatitude must take into account the Bible and Jewish sources that view helping people in conflict to reconcile and live in peace as one of the chief works of mercy. On Christ’s lips the beatitude about peacemakers derives from the new commandment of brotherly love and is one way which the love of neighbour is expressed.”

However in Luke, Jesus seems to make a contradictory statement when he asks: “Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.” So one might ask, “What kind of peace and unity did Jesus come to bring?” Cantalamessa indicates “he come to bring peace and unity to whatever is good and leads to eternal life and he came to remove the false peace and unity that only lulls the conscience to sleep and leads to ruin.” Thought provoking to say the very least, is this kind of peace possible in our world today? I think we have a long way to go.

In my view which Beatitude should the church be devoting particular attention at this time? That is a difficult question for me to answer. In the Appendix of his book, Cantalamessa offers a personal examination of conscience based on the Beatitudes. If I change the personal pronoun to “the church,” I think the first beatitude may be the one. “Is the church poor in spirit, poor within, having abandoned everything to God? Is the church free and detached from earthly goods? What does money mean to the church? Does the church seek to lead a sober and simple lifestyle that is fitting for those who want to bear witness to the gospel? Does the church take to heart the problem of the terrible poverty that is not chosen but imposed on so many millions of her brothers and sisters.” These are powerful questions for the church to ponder and for me to ponder, too!

How might our two churches engage in common witness in the centrality of the Beatitudes for Christian life and service. As Mennonites and Catholics, we are called to be peacemakers. Cantalamessa calls attention to Pope Benedict’s address for World Peace Day on January 1, 2007, entitled “The Human Person, the Heart of Peace.”

There is a central affirmation in the message that is the key to understanding the whole of it. The pope says: “Peace is both gift and task. If it is true that peace between individuals and peoples – the ability to live together to build relationships of justice and solidarity – calls for unflinching commitment on our part, it is also true, and indeed more so, that *peace is a gift from God*. Peace is an aspect of God’s activity, made manifest in both the creation of an orderly and harmonious universe and also in the redemption of humanity that needs to be rescued from the disorder of sin. Creation and redemption thus provide a key that helps to understand the meaning of our life on earth.”

I think the Pope’s message is urgent and timely. Cantalamessa indicates that “today a new area of difficult and urgent work is opening up for peacemakers: promoting peace among religions and with religion, that is, peace among religions themselves and peace between believers from various religions and the secular unbelieving world. The theologian Hans Kung introduced the following slogan during the international meeting of the parliament of the World’s religions in Chicago in 1993:

For there can be:

No peace among nations without peace among the religions.

No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.

We must continue our common witness to dialogue as Mennonites and Catholics to be instruments of God’s peace.

Dora’s reflections:

I memorized many parts of the Sermon on the Mount as a child, to get a reduction on Bible camp fees. So it seems the Beatitudes have been with me forever, like old markers, like a fence around my life. They’ve been, yes, markers for my (Mennonite) understanding of discipleship.

In this recent reflection, however, I was struck by something else. The opening beatitudes, at least, seem an expression of holes in the soul. I see need, grief, poverty of whatever kind, hunger. Yes, there's a happiness expressed, but next to gaping wounds.

I attended some of the events of the Thin Air writers' festival here in Winnipeg last week, and found it interesting that writers like Miriam Toews, Rosemary Nixon, Wayne Tefs, said things like "we're all wounded" and "we're really messed up humans." I felt an honesty there that I encounter less often in church. We jump the "happy" or "blessed" right over the hole and proclaim the solid ground we've landed on: the kingdom, the satisfaction, the comfort, the earth for our heritage. But it's that emptiness, that hole in the center – that's what we bring.

It seems to me that these opening beatitudes are a description of faith. I'm reading Miroslav Volf's *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, and he reminds, "To have faith is to be 'without works before God' (Rom. 4:5).... It is empty hands open for God to fill."

Empty hands open for God to fill. Over the last years I've felt acutely poor in my spirit. I've often wished I had more faith. But looking at faith this way, maybe I have more than I realize. And if we set the empty hands of these beatitudes next to the gifts of God shown here, it's a picture of wholeness, or salvation.

You may protest that there's "doing" or discipleship here, and I agree. But it emerges from the hole. The first that, to my mind, pulls out of the hole is the fifth in the Matthew list, which is the beatitude I'm particularly attracted at this time. (To answer question # 4!)

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. So needy I am – needing mercy, as implied in the second line, within the statement of gift – but there's something huge required first. "Be merciful as your Father is merciful" and "by your standard of measure it will be measured to you." (Luke 6:36,38)

This is a challenge for me, and I think it's a challenge for the church. What challenges me is the notion that I/we determine the wideness of the mercy given to me/us. I'm thinking of the recent debates about hell, over Rob Bell's book *Love Wins*, for example. For many, the issue may be about Scripture, but I can't help feeling that underneath the fears and critique of going "soft" on hell there's a failure of mercy. We're like Jonah, who said, "I knew that you were a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in graciousness, relenting from evil," and we're disappointed – mightily ticked off, in fact, and ready to give up on the whole business if that's what it involves – when God shows mercy to Nineveh.

I had to think of the following scenario. What if hell is actually what I was taught growing up, an everlasting and literal torment, but that it's me who's set at the entrance, and I get to decide the fate of at least a few other people. The only stipulation is that

whatever criteria I use in my investigation and my decision are recorded and they will be the ones used to “in” or “out” me. I can imagine that this might lead to some pretty “deep listening” on my part to the people I’m deciding about, and probably significantly shift the quality of my mercy. – Or maybe simply take me back to the holes that are my faith: “Nothing in my hands I (we) bring, simply to thy cross I (we) cling.”

How can I/we learn to be merciful? There’s some stories we might set ourselves into, to learn from. The book of Jonah, for one. Or Jesus and the thief on the cross. (Luke 23:39–43) Richard John Neuhaus, in *Death on a Friday Afternoon*, reflects on Jesus’ mercy in the words: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” He writes, “The first one home is a thief. Jesus is not very fastidious about the company he keeps.”

Neuhaus further notes that Jesus is “not fastidious about the quality of faith.” The thief’s cry is a little thin as far as our preferred conversion narratives go, but, says Neuhaus, “Give him [Christ] an opening, almost any opening, and he opens life to wonder beyond measure.”

But there’s something else I find interesting in the encounter between Jesus and the thieves. The so-called good thief *first* shows mercy to Jesus. He puts in a word for him, defends him against the verbal abuse of his fellow thief. He shows himself merciful – and he is shown mercy.

How can our two churches—Mennonite and Catholic—engage in common witness around the Beatitudes? I wish we both could be merciful in more radical ways. Be less fastidious. Be the first to show mercy to the shamed and excluded. Allow salvation to one another, for sure, and also to the whole world.

Richard offered these reflections:

Answering the directions in Agenda, in order, I can’t recall where and when I first heard the Beatitudes proclaimed or exemplified. I am not aware of a particular time when I first realized the significance of the Beatitudes for my own life, and I cannot name any book or film that I have found particularly helpful in understanding the Beatitudes.

The question of which one of the eight Beatitudes to which I am particularly attracted is interesting, but not one that I had ever thought about. For me, the Beatitudes had always been pretty much a package deal, a beautiful summary of what the Gospel, the good news is all about.

Nevertheless, I think that I have long been particularly attracted to the fourth Beatitude: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” For me this is connected to social justice, both in society generally, and within the Church especially. I’m not sure why, and I suspect this is not entirely a “good” thing, but it seems that it is most often discomfort and even anger about the lack of justice in social relations and in particular about the failure of church leaders to act justly in their roles that motivates me in much of my involvement in organizations working for reform in the

Church. I have been and remain especially distressed by the failure of the Catholic hierarchy, up to and including popes, to act responsibly in dealing with priests who have been guilty of sexual abuse of children and minors.

For me, the challenge for the church in our day is to demonstrate that it really hungers and thirsts for righteousness (in the sense of justice). In my view, the hierarchy is rapidly losing credibility because of its commitment to clericalism, to maintaining the power and control of a celibate male clerical caste by refusing to consider the ordination of married men and the ordination of women. I agree with Fr Roy Bourgeois that in our time this has become an issue of justice.

For me, the Church's credibility in preaching the other Beatitudes is being seriously compromised by failures with respect to the fourth Beatitude.

A common witness with respect to the centrality of the Beatitudes for Christian life and service could be, in my opinion, much more important for the spread of the Gospel than concerns about relatively minor and niggling points of disagreement about defined doctrines, sacraments, and ritual. To make the point that this applies to interfaith and as well as ecumenical relations, I'll close with a quote from Pope Benedict (in a speech to representatives of the German Jewish Community on 22 September 2011: "In fact, the Sermon on the Mount does not abolish the Mosaic Law, but reveals its hidden possibilities and allows more radical demands to emerge. It points us towards the deepest source of human action, the heart, where choices are made between what is pure and what is impure, where faith, hope and love blossom forth."

Victor offered these reflections:

The Beatitudes have been a central component of my understanding of the Christian faith as long as I can remember. I have been teaching and preaching on Matthew 5 and especially the Beatitudes for over 35 years.

I find that as I get older, dogmatics have become less significant for me: perhaps part of the increasing sense that we really know very little for certain, that much of our theology is speculative, and that different people arrive at different understandings and convictions. One consequence of this has been that I have come to increasingly appreciate biblical texts such as Jesus' teaching about the central commandment (Mark 12:28f) and the Beatitudes.

Am I drawn especially to any one Beatitude? In the past ten years I have focused a good deal of my thought and energy on the topic of peace, so the seventh Beatitude has some special significance—however, in relationship to the others: "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God."

A few related thoughts on "peacemaking":

– The National Film Board film "The Glass House" (the story of a boy and greenhouse: "Some people are builders, and some are wreckers; I used to be a wrecker." It is a story

of an old man with a green house on the theme that some people are builders and some wreckers. A boy throws a rock through a window. The boy is caught and the old man teaches him to care for plants, become a builder. The film is on the same theme as the Beatitudes.

– The Wi'am Centre in Bethlehem (Palestinian Christians work at peacemaking, e.g., by organizing summer camps for Jewish and Palestinian children).

– In context of Mennonite Church Canada, a particularly challenging issue will be the discussion of sexuality, including homosexuality (there is a wide range of convictions, and the challenge will be to develop a mechanism to resolve this potentially divisive conflict in a redemptive manner).

Do I find any Beatitude particularly problematic? They are all problematic—that is troublesome—yet also very hopeful!

Is any Beatitude particularly important for the church in our time? Probably not only *one*; the church needs to attend to both the internal and the external aspects that are addressed by the Beatitudes (e.g., righteousness and purity as well as peacemaking).

Paul offered these comments and reflections:

When Pope John Paul II visited Castro—he talked about the Bible—specifically the Sermon on the Mount. He is quoted as saying that Karl Marx approved of the Sermon. So there you have it—Fidel Castro assuring us that Karl Marx thinks that our text for today is a good one.

This is a lengthy description, by Jesus, of how he wants people to live. It is here that we come up against it—the question is basic—does Jesus really expect this kind of life from his followers? It seems unrealistic and impossible. It's precisely this seemingly impossible standard that has caused the Sermon on the Mount to have been treated by Christians as something other than a standard expected by our Lord.

A fascinating exercise in studying the Sermon on the Mount is to see how other people have explained it. The late Clarence Bauman, an Anabaptist scholar, published a book in 1985 entitled *The Sermon on the Mount: The Modern Quest for Its Meaning*. As part of his introduction, he includes a breathless list of 36 major schools of interpretation of the Sermon, and then goes on to describe most of them. What's astounding is that many of these attempts at interpretation conclude that the Sermon on the Mount is **not** meant as a realistic requirement for Christians. It's explainable in other ways, but not in the sense that we must follow it today. Before the Reformation, for example, the church often saw the Sermon as applying to an elite group of Christians who gave their lives over to God in a unique way—often those in the monastic life. But the rest of Christendom was busy with 'real life'—marrying, raising children, working, and so on.

In more recent times, we've seen it interpreted by Albert Schweitzer as being an interim ethic—Jesus thought the kingdom was coming very soon, so till it came, his followers

should live according to the Sermon. However, the end did not come as quickly as Jesus thought it would, and so we have this Sermon which is impossible to follow in the long term.

Lewis Sperry Chafer, an American fundamentalist, interpreted the Bible dispensationally, and saw the Sermon as belonging to the future kingdom when Christ was in full control—the Sermon describes life on earth sometime in the future—it holds no sense of obligation for us now. One of my favourite quotes, by Johannes Muller, “Can one really place upon a person of flesh and blood the moral burden of Jesus’ teachings? No, as moral Law the Sermon on the Mount is a torture rack upon which people uselessly torment themselves..”

Reinhold Niebuhr, the famous American theologian and ethicist, described the Sermon on the Mount, and Jesus’ teachings in general, as an “impossible ideal.” For Niebuhr, it was crucial not to water down any of Jesus’ sayings—but we should not fool ourselves into thinking we could follow them. However, the Sermon wasn’t useless. As he points out in his essay, “The Relevance of an Impossible Ethical Ideal,” Jesus shows us the way, but it is not realizable in any historic situation—so we must be ‘realistic’—for example, he believed that the individual can be more ethical than a group.

More recently, Robert Schuller, famous for his TV show “The Hour of Power” and his Crystal Cathedral, has suggested that the Beatitudes are in fact simply positive mental attitudes that he has renamed the “Be Happy Attitudes.” As the cover of the book puts it—eight positive attitudes that can transform your life—followed of course by an exclamation point.

These kinds of interpretations are very compelling (OK, with the exception of Schuller). In the end, however, I’m convinced that many of these enlightened minds admire what is being said without really affirming what it means. (Bauman, p. ix) So against these kinds of interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount we find a stream of thought that is part of our Mennonite heritage—I refer here not to our ethnic heritage, but our spiritual heritage. The Anabaptists, beginning in the Radical Reformation, have maintained that the Sermon on the Mount is an ethical charter that is to be taken seriously and literally—it is not to be explained away, softened or justified, it is to be lived. I want to align myself with this way of reading the Sermon on the Mount—in other words, Jesus was speaking to his disciples, and he meant his words to be a standard of life for people who follow him, fully intending to put those followers badly out of synch with the society around them, and accountable to a higher standard than the religious establishment of the time held to, just as his disciples were being called to live differently than the Pharisees.

If we take this Anabaptist stance, are we being realistic? Can we live up to these standards?

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” What does this say to us, the church of Christ seeking to follow this beatitude? I believe that the intent of these

words includes not only a spiritualized message but a physical one as well, i.e. we have here a reference to people who don't have very much in the way of material things. The parallel passage in Luke simply says—"Blessed are the poor." It seems that God is on the side of the poor. Nicholas Wolterstorff, a Reformed philosopher puts it this way (his original audience was Dutch): "...we cannot but conclude that God has taken sides with the poor. God is not on the side of Dutch-speaking people versus those who do not speak Dutch; on that he is even-handed. God is not on the side of football players versus those who do not play football; on that he is even-handed. [my own aside] (I might add that he is not even on one team of players versus another team) But the poor are different. It is against his will that there be a society in which some are poor; in His perfected Kingdom there will be none at all. It is even more against his will that there be a society in which some are poor while others are rich. When that happens, then he is on the side of the poor, for it is they, he says, who are being wronged. He is not on the side of the rich, and he is not even-handed. But on the other hand, the poor are not romanticized; they are not praised; they are blessed. And, yes, they can turn aside the blessing. Blessing is pronounced on those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Not all the poor do so." (Until Justice and Peace Embrace, p.76/77)

This implies several things for us. Those of us who are caught in the bondage that wealth holds are in fact further from the kingdom than the poor. Riches block the kingdom's entrance. Possessions have a demonic power over us, seducing us into beliefs and actions that are more in line with economics textbooks than the teachings of Christ. This means that Christians must live differently even in our financial dealings. In keeping with the words of Jesus, at least I must affirm that wealth is not to be equated with God's blessing, and that lack of wealth is not a sign of God's disapproval. Jesus certainly called into question the system in place in his day, and in the church, he wants us to do the same today. It's not a matter of common sense, but a matter of obedience.

A Latin American prayer puts it this way; "O God, to those who have hunger, give bread; and to us who have bread, give the hunger for justice." (p. 1 Wolterstorff)

Tom began by saying Paul's remarks resonated with him. Recalling different moments in his life when he encountered the Beatitudes, he remembered returning a Ford Ranger truck, and finding it hard to explain his reasons (simplifying his life), and dating a girl (now his wife!) who lived in a very large house, and conversations with his future mother-in-law, who thought the Church was great but had difficult with the Blessed are the Poor business. It turns out his girl's parents came from Ukraine after WWII with nothing. From experience, they knew that being poor sucks. Being poor is frustrating; it exercises power over you. Tom also recalled a Mass on the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary time at the University of Notre Dame, a big flashy Mass with all the bells and smells, and hearing the celebrant preach on why it is good to be poor, a theme that seemed ingenuous in the setting. He recalled a Holy Cross father discoursing on spiritual poverty while he lit up another fat cigar. So Tom said he was quite aware of tensions in trying to be comfortable with the Beatitudes. It seems the best one can hope for is balance, balance between being meek and hungering for righteousness, between humility and hungering for justice for others—as opposed to wishing for humility for others and keeping

righteousness for ourselves.

Donna said she felt overwhelmed by what others had said about the Beatitudes. She was interested in word studies. She reflected on the phrase “happy are they” (as in the psalms), and thought that “blessed” works better. The Beatitudes challenge of how we live. It seems overwhelming to be comforted and to be merciful, to be a peacemaker. Balance helps to bring some comfort. She recalled the gospel passage about people being divided between sheep and goats – none of the things mentioned relate to not being heterosexual, or many other things that are talked against in the church. They relate to personal choices to things like a thirst for righteousness. She felt challenged, as first born, to make everybody do the right thing. Opposed to this is a merciful attitude to others who don’t do the right thing. We hunger for more, more from God sooner and quicker. God put the hunger there! Tension between what we have and what we seek. Let the Holy Spirit speak to me.

Ron chose to speak mostly about “Blessed are those who mourn.” He said he was called to be preacher while quite young, and often preached on the Beatitudes, and one of the first text he preached on what Blessed are those who mourn. He recalled a Presbyterian book on the beatitudes that argued that they are meant to be lived, lived within the church, within the congregation. The church should be the kind of people that Jesus describes. Ron saw a paradox between being happy (blessed) and the deep-seated joy that makes the possible possible. He also cited Richard Rohr, in his book *Falling Upward*, which portrays crises as contexts in which we can grow spiritually in a productive way. At present time his wife is going through such a time, having discovered a medical problem, being fast-tracked through the system, and living with the possibility that it could be cancer. In such moments we are steered to deeper things, to spiritual things. We don’t ask for problems, but blessings can come even as we mourn. We experience true mourning when we allow our hearts to be broken by the things that break the heart of God. We should look at the world in the way that God does, with an honesty that we resist. He considers the fact that he and his wife are pastoring in this particular congregation a personal application of this theory of mourning. It costs to be here, but he is really thankful for the chance to feel and see the difficulties that break God’s heart.

Nancy attributed her conversion to become a Mennonite to having observed Mennonites living the Sermon on the Mount. Now as a Catholic, she is happy to find the same thing among Catholics. She cited examples of people like Dorothy Day. She believes that the Beatitudes are meant to be taken literally. She finds herself drawn to books and movies that reflect the Beatitudes. Her favourite Beatitude is Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God. This for her means seeing things as God sees them. Nancy then told a story about attending a wedding, where the recessional was the hymn “Blessed are they, rejoice and be glad.” She found this so beautiful as a wedding recessional (which had been chosen by the couple). She and her husband met the couple some years later, living out the joy promised by that hymn.

Helmut shared the following reflections on the Beatitudes:

I learned the Beatitudes from memory in Daily Vacation Bible School (DVBS) which we attended in our elementary years in the (Old) Mennonite Church in Vineland, Ontario. The church is called First Mennonite Church, and it was actually the first Mennonite church in Canada, dating back to 1812.

I always assumed them to be significant.

In seminary studies it was said that Mennonites regard the Sermon on the Mount as “the gospel within the Gospel.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *The Cost of Discipleship* was significant in my reading on the Beatitudes. But I was uneasy with Bonhoeffer because for him grace trumps discipleship; grace trumps works. In pondering my unease, I came to the conviction that grace and ‘following Jesus’ (*Gnade und Nachfolge*) are coequals. It is not that grace always gets us out of trouble when we overdo our works. Rather the power and spirit of “forgiving and being forgiven” (in spite of our human sinfulness) flows from the same divine source as does “following Jesus in life.” Both our forgiveness and our discipleship are made possible and are empowered by the grace of God. Ephesians 2:8–10.

The church should be devoting particular attention to: “Blessed are the peacemakers.” The Christian church needs to keep up its role of advocacy for reconciliation, for dialogue rather than bombs; for nonviolence rather than violence.

Our two churches (Mennonites and Catholics) might engage in common witness based on the centrality of the Beatitudes for Christian life and service?

When Catholic sisters join Christian Peacemaker Teams, a witness in the midst of conflict situations such as At-Twani, and they work together there, we are engaged in common witness. Together with Catholics and with all Christians we need to re-examine the Beatitudes to re-discover three truths: 1) the meaning of “blessed” – which does not mean ‘successful,’ but something like ‘hopeful’ or ‘showered with hope.’ 2) that the Beatitudes are for here and now, as signs of the kingdom of God, pointing to God’s future and keeping the reality of that future alive in our midst. 3) the fact that the beatitudes are meant as a call to a “higher righteousness” for those devoted to Jesus Christ. They are not an option, but they belong essentially to ‘the way of salvation.’

Luis concluded by saying that when we look at Scripture, we look at what we have in common. Poor, righteousness, mourning, pure of heart, way forward, looked at ecumenical texts, fundamental stuff, spiritual above all. Are these themes to pursue in our future dialogues?

8. Date of our next meeting. After some discussion, it was agreed that we should try to meet again on Wednesday 18 January, 4:30 to 9:00 pm. **Nancy** offered the St. Charles Retreat Centre as the venue.

9. **Reflections on the meeting.** **Victor** requested reflections on the meeting, taking the pulse of the meeting. **Richard** said that while he very much appreciated the richness of the reflections offered by all the participants, he missed the interchange of ideas that usually characterized our dialogues. He wondered, can we combine both? It was acknowledged that it was difficult to give time to 14 people, and that Ron Nelson had taken quite a bit of time. **Donna** expressed her gratitude for being here, and listening to these wide reflections by wise Christians. **Tom** appreciated the personal nature of the reflection and the way they touched on spirituality. **Paul** indicated he would have liked to have seen more attention given to differences, which should not be papered over. Did our contributions reflect differences? Paul was not sure. Do Catholics and Mennonites live the beatitudes differently?

10. **Future agenda.** There were various suggestions, including a retreat on the Beatitudes, another Bible study (perhaps the parables), a look at ecumenical communities, discussion of an article, study of a theme in the Bible, such as poverty, social justice, homosexuality, the role of women in the Church, etc. Participants were invited to submit more ideas to Helmut and Luis.

11. **Closing worship** led by Donna. Near the end of this event, participants read the collected prayers for our gathered group – as follows:

Oh God, my soul hungers and thirsts for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. I seek you with all my heart and soul, and I sincerely desire to live as you would have me live, with honesty and integrity and a constant spirit of gratitude. Lord, have mercy on me, satisfy my hungry spirit, and quench my desperate thirst. May your kingdom come and our will be done. Lord, have mercy on me. Amen.

Gracious God, our comforter and guide, we look to you this day for the patience and the courage to consider our ways, so that we may walk as faithful pilgrims in the paths you have forged for us on your way through suffering to glory! Amen.

[Prayer of St Francis, abbreviated] Lord, make me an instrument of our peace: where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy... For it is giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Lord I give you my heart that only you can make pure. Help me to see you. I give you my thirst for righteousness, knowing that you put desires into me only to fulfill them. And for our churches, I pray that they will grow in this radical call to simplicity, service, and above all, joy.

We stand before you empty, Lord, in need of your mercy. We hear to you say: Be merciful, my children, and happy you will be, for you will be given what you need. AMEN.

Father, I pray that I may come to a more lively appreciation of all the Beatitudes, to understand them more deeply, and to live my life in a way that reflects the values that they enshrine.

A Latin American prayer puts it this way: “O God, to those who have hunger give bread; and to those who have bread, give the hunger for justice.”

Gracious and living God, all praise and glory to you for your Word, Jesus Christ, who is alive in your holy people gathered through the Holy Spirit. May your Beatitudes take root in our respective churches and tradition as well as in our personal lives. Inspired and enabled, may we give faithful witness to your Son and work together for your kingdom of peace where there is gentleness, consolation, justice, vision, and mercy for all. This we pray in the name of your Son who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.

Blessed are you Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have all that sustains us: Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God; Blessed are those who hunger, for they shall be filled; Blessed are those who weep, for they shall laugh. Thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Lord, we confess that we often find ourselves cold and callous as we recognize suffering people in our world. We realize that you love both us in our weakness and others in their need. You “mourn” over injustices and needs among suffering people, wherever they are. Forgive us for our indifference and move among us by your Holy Spirit that we too might be moved to respond with love and grace to the many hurting people in our world. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen.

Blessed are you Lord, the source of all blessing, for speaking a good word to us. Blessed be the Lord, God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Blessed by the Lord forever. Amen and Amen.

Holy God, Creator of heavens and the earth, of all things old, and all things new. Open our eyes to the places of desolation right around us; those dark and abandoned places of empire. That we might journey hand in hand with those who are famished and parched, and encounter our own complicity in injustice. Forgive us, and fill us with your abundant righteousness, that we might bear witness to the Prince of Peace. Amen.

Gracious God, every so often I reflect on who bless my life is. “Blessed!” What a beautiful word! It is one that your son Jesus used so spontaneously in the Beatitudes. What does this word mean? – Serene, Joyful, Contented – Peace-filled. Being blessed may not mean that I have everything I desire in life, but that’s okay. What I do have, contributes to my love of life and of you, God. All that is blessed in my life opens me to the beauty which surrounds me. Thank you, God, for the gift of your Son, Jesus, who has given me the Beatitudes, a plan to live blessedly in the midst of everything. Amen.

12. **Closing comments.** Helmut voiced a thank you to Ron Nelson for hosting our meeting at Trinity Lutheran Church and to Ron Penner's son for the meal. **Luis** thanked all for coming and participating.