

THE CALL TO MISSION: REFLECTIONS AND CHALLENGES FROM AN ANABAPTIST BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Peter Stucky

I would like to begin with the well-known passage from Romans 1:16: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.* With this passage I would like to say that the power of the good news of Jesus to change lives and this world is unimaginable. Perhaps the problem has to do with the fact that the salvation of which this passage speaks has suffered from an unfortunate reductionism that does not permit us to grasp the height, depth, width and length of the salvation that we might experience in our churches if we allowed the Holy Spirit of God to guide us toward being and living out the reality of the people of God in our different contexts.

I would like to share with you some experiences that we have had in our local church, the Teusaquillo Mennonite Church in Bogotá. Although they are a small part of our testimony, I would like to use this to illustrate that to live the gospel and to live Anabaptism are not two different things, but rather that Anabaptism provides a specific way of understanding what it means to follow Jesus. I do not say that it is better or worse than the perspectives of other families of faith, but it is our perspective and it enriches and orients us in the midst of the great tensions that we suffer in Latin America. Also with our testimony I would like to illustrate the falsity of the dichotomy that is sometimes presented between being Anabaptist or Mennonite and evangelizing and spreading the gospel, or between working for justice and peace or praying and seeking the gifts of the Spirit, and other dichotomies or separations that disunite us and tear apart the Body of the Lord.

Some Comments Relating to John 9

In order to organize this short testimony, let me start with some

Peter Stucky, leader of the Colombian Mennonite church, became pastor of the Teusaquillo Mennonite Church in Bogotá in 1995, and presented this personal reflection at the CAMCA gathering in Argentina in January 2008.

comments on chapter 9 of the Gospel of John where Jesus heals a man who was born blind. The religious authorities, very confused or perhaps embarrassed, try to minimize it, or if possible deny the happening. Unable to do so, however, they try to place it within their own religious framework with their own presuppositions and categories. They argue with the blind man and with his parents. They discredit Jesus and the blind man and finally expel him from the synagogue.

The ninth chapter of John reflects the growing conflict of Jesus with the Jewish religious authorities who were anchored in power and a comfortable lifestyle and did not permit the one that could have saved and renewed them to enter into their lives. In this chapter the blindness of this man is replaced not only with physical sight but also with the ability to recognize the presence of God in Jesus of Nazareth.

Instead of welcoming the blind man as one who was able to bring good news from God, the Pharisees persecuted and rejected him, expelling him from the synagogue. Those who were able to physically see but did not accept God's powerful action, nor recognize his presence in Jesus, turned out to be more blind than the one who could not see.

Thus on the immediate level, John 9 points to the sad rejection of Jesus by the religious authorities of his people, leading later to his death through conspiracy, treachery, Jewish-Roman manipulation, religious-secular intrigue and the disloyalty of the people. The religious establishment refused to renew itself and admit the possibility that a person outside the system might bring a new vision of what God is doing among them and the possibility of reformulating the mission that God has for his people in the contemporary world.

The one who had the key to this renewal was the blind man, the rejected one, who was accused of having sinned as an explanation for his blindness. Yet it was he who would bring the presence of Jesus Christ, the new wine. The problem is that this new wine tears the old wineskins, and the owners of the wineskins preferred to have the wineskins without the new wine.

In his New Testament doctoral dissertation on the Gospel of John, Jack Suderman reminds us that another level of interpretation for this gospel reflects the experience of a minority Christian community persecuted by the Jewish

religious authorities, probably later than A.D. 85.¹ According to Suderman, the ninth chapter of John, as is true of the entire gospel, reflects what was happening in the Johannine community toward the end of the first century. The story of the blind man whom the synagogue authorities expelled describes the experience of the author's community. That is, it is the autobiography of the author and of the Johannine community who, like the blind man, were expelled from the Jewish synagogue.

To read the book from the perspective of the excluded community, persecuted by the religious establishment in the first century, is also to read about the marginalization and exclusion of social groups that are not accepted by the established churches and the tragedy that this represents for the salvation of these churches. Once again God offers salvation in Christ Jesus to the Jewish community with the opportunity to accept the Johannine community and its message, but it does not do so. On the contrary, it expels the community — and in this way brings down judgment on itself.

The religious institutions that refuse to allow the entrance of the excluded but who claim to have eyes to see and understand the truths and the purposes of the Kingdom, make themselves liable to God's judgment because in reality they walk in the blindness of the traditions and privileges they have acquired and of their comfortable lives. They are not interested in putting into practice the example and the practice of Jesus.

OUR TESTIMONY: "The call to mission, reflections and challenges from an Anabaptist biblical perspective."

On this theme I would like to review our path as the Mennonite Community of Teusaquillo in Bogotá of which I am pastor. This group formalized its intention to become a church in an apartment in Chapinero, an area of Bogotá, in 1977, although they had been meeting together informally since 1973. From the beginning, the idea was to cultivate a community vision rather than a traditional church. This matter of becoming a church, and not simply a social group, was something that developed little by little among those who attended. From the beginning they emphasized shared leadership, taking turns teaching the Bible

¹ Robert J. Suderman, "The Replacement Pattern in the Fourth Gospel: a Persecuted Community Confronts its Past", PhD dissertation, Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, 1994.

with community participation, caring for one another and being informal. But it is necessary to emphasize that no community or initiative moves forward without someone or several persons exercising leadership, even though it is shared.

As the group grew we felt the need for a pastoral figure more dedicated to this work in order to coordinate the community. In 1980 we moved in that direction. In 1981 we moved to the present building in Teusaquillo which since that time has been our location.

However, these two things, the development of pastoral leadership and acquiring a building as headquarters, seem to me to have had an institutionalizing effect on the community. We no longer met informally as we had done in the apartment, nor did we sit on pillows on the floor or on the carpet while studying the Word as a community, but rather we gathered in a large room where we sat in chairs arranged in rows, and we listened to a pastor who taught us and coordinated the activities.

In this way we acquired more of the formal characteristics of an institutional church. Parallel to this our activities became routine in some ministries and we became comfortable with the idea of the Mennonite Church of Teusaquillo. We have had several pastors.

Almost from the beginning of the group, that is towards the end of 1973, I was involved actively in the community in several ways, but in the middle of the 90s, I began to feel a desire—a call—to be its pastor. I say that the Holy Spirit was placing this feeling in my heart—something I had not felt earlier—giving me a vision of the type of community that I would enjoy helping to build. I was ordained to the ministry in late 1993.

This feeling coincided with the departure of the former pastor in the second semester of 1994. It is clear in retrospect that this was one of those God-centered occasions in which God prepares the persons, the feelings and the precise moment in time, as well as the manner to proceed.

However, when I began to pastor the church in February of 1995, the church had been established with a stable, not very large membership, of middle class, lower middle, professional and nonprofessional people with some fixed programs relating to Christian education and prayer. In general terms it carried out its program with a limited projection toward those outside the church. One can say that it was well-established.

One thing that has occupied my thoughts in all of my pastoral experience is that I would like for the church to avoid the polarization, which is so common, between that which is spiritual and that which involves social action, between those who pray and those who work for justice, between those who fast and those who provide food for the hungry. In other words, I have dreamed of a church where the presence of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is acknowledged and sought and where instead of mutual criticism on the part of the two groups, we appreciate and recognize the need and the importance of each group with its gifts and ministry. The church needs the person who prays and also the person who works for justice and human development. We need each other.

Although I had a vision of the characteristics and the type of church that I would like to see, I did not arrive with either plans or a program of action in my thoughts. But God had something surprising, destabilizing and redemptive for our church, and that was the appearance of very needy and excluded persons from our society. First, there were internally displaced persons, then those whose lives were threatened, the handicapped, prisoners, street people, undernourished hungry children and, also, an armed conflict that affects all of us.

But before telling you more about this, I would like to comment on a word of the Lord that I received from a sister who was a friend, although from another church. It was a prophetic word and came about as follows. About the time when I assumed the pastorate in a time of prayer on the third floor, this sister whose name is Ema, told me that she felt the need to read a passage from the Bible to me and she began to read from Joshua 20. It is a passage relating to cities of refuge when God ordered Joshua to establish places of refuge and protection for those who were pursued by the avengers of blood, relatives of those who had been assassinated, when death was accidental. This teaching is very important in the Hexateuch for it appears four times in different forms.

Cities of Refuge?

At any rate, Ema continued reading and while reading she appeared confused and a bit embarrassed. She said, "I do not know what this means but the Lord gave me this passage." I did not feel so confused because I had an idea. During the 80s I was part of an ecumenical committee that, with the help of Amnesty International, helped people who were fleeing from assassination here

in Colombia, to leave the country. I recall that they would arrive in my office on the first floor with great fear, like rabbits pursued by hunting dogs I thought. With the help of God I tried to encourage them to be tranquil and to find a way to help them leave the country to save their lives.

When Ema read this passage from God, I remembered this but now quite a number of years had gone by and I no longer was involved in any of this. Nevertheless, I understood and I wondered: "Is it possible that God might be speaking to this church?"

But let us return to the story of the church. More or less in the year 1997 there burst into our church the reality of the cruel, unjust and heartless internal displacement in our country, with the seizure of the installations of the Colombia Institute of Agrarian Reform (INCORA) by displaced persons from the Bellacruz Hacienda in the Department of Cesar. With the help of a brother from the congregation, we began to visit them, promoting children's activities, and in general, trying to make their situation there a bit less burdensome.

One of those people was in grave danger of being assassinated. Manuel Narvaez and his family came to the church and we did what we could to help them. A humble sister in the church, Isabel Tarquino, provided lodging and a place to hide them in her house on the south side. This provided some protection until they could leave for asylum in Belgium. Manuel miraculously escaped assassination, supposedly by the paramilitary in the heart of Bogotá.

Since that time we have experienced many cases of truly miraculous divine interventions in favor of persons who placed themselves in the first place under God's care and also of the church, God's people. We have seen the same God who liberated Peter from jail and execution by the hand of Herod in the Book of Acts exercising his saving power by liberating Jobany, Isabel, Teresa daughter of Nora, John, and Claudia from what seemed to be certain death, and also the liberation of Jonathan the son of Claudia from two abductions, and of other persons from assaults and severe persecution. God respects the faith of his people.

Project with Displaced Persons

I believe it was more or less in 1999 that the National Mennonite Church of Colombia, with the support of the North American Mennonite Central

Committee initiated a project for local churches to work with displaced people that in that time were filling our cities. One of the areas of work of Mencoldes, the Mennonite Colombian Foundation for Development involved displaced people. But with this program we formed a Committee for Displaced People in the local church to give them holistic attention and they began to arrive to be heard and helped. To the degree that we were able we helped them with humanitarian aid, training courses, listening and counseling.

At the same time that the church opened its doors to these displaced persons, it opened its heart and mind and extended its arms. This was a jolt for the congregation, a collision of cultures, an impact of people who were different, needy, traumatized and disoriented. This demanded intense attention, a great amount of time, love, and human and economic resources.

For many of those who arrived, it was and continues to be the first time that they have had the opportunity to really hear and become acquainted with the Good News of Jesus Christ for their lives. Dozens—or perhaps hundreds—of them have responded with enthusiasm and joy to the kind and free invitation of our Lord Jesus Christ who has washed them with his precious blood, forgiven them, cleansed them, raised them up, dried their tears, restored them and changed their lives. In this we experienced the truth of Jesus' declaration: "The Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost." They had lost so much: years of life and effort, lives of relatives, life plans, self respect, stability and so many other things. However, Jesus has restored everything and much more, believe it or not.

For some of the older members of the congregation, it was not easy to accept the new members. They felt displaced in their own church, with a resultant lack of pastoral attention. They felt insecurity for themselves and for their children. Some left the church. Perhaps they could not appreciate the new things that God was doing among us. Perhaps we did not know how to interpret it or we didn't take time to do so. Like the rich young man whom Jesus looked at with compassion, we observed with sadness the fact that some were unable to rejoice in the new things that were happening in their presence. As in John 9 it was an opportunity to see how God manifested his glory.

However, it is necessary to say that the great majority of the members of the congregation responded in an admirable and laudable way. Their attitude was broadened and they realized that God was doing something new and

important. They opened their hearts and lives to this new reality. Sunday after Sunday, upon introducing new people we realized that they came from the four corners of the country to hear the Gospel and surrender their lives to Jesus and to experience the new life, renewing the congregation with many talents and with energy, joy and strength. God has given us the great privilege of presenting the Gospel and of being instruments for conversion, a change of life, and for the salvation of many people who had never had the opportunity of knowing Jesus or were too busy with their daily activities, or indifferent and had never given it their attention. This is a privilege that the congregation has shared.

These new persons replaced the sadness of their hearts with hearts that were overflowing with gratitude and love. They gave us lessons of solidarity among themselves. They came with a history of endurance and suffering, of constant challenges and with energy to work and collaborate.

The long-time members of the congregation have an important role in the church. They are mature, provide a stable nucleus, take part in certain important ministries and provide economic stability. But as for the participation of the newer members, they were not marginalized. They were given the opportunity to take part in Christian formation, in ministries such as food provision for the needy and in special activities. To feel useful is not only beneficial, but also promotes healing and does marvels for people's self-esteem, as well as providing a very valuable contribution. There have also been opportunities for integration between older and newer members that contributed to the destruction of barriers where there was a lack of trust. It is important to respect and listen to the older members.

The church Committee for Displaced Persons, along with Mencoldes, helped the displaced persons from Bellacruz who had received land in the Cámbulos Hacienda near Armero-Guayabal. One of the sisters, following a visit, remarked with her regional accent: "One realizes that we definitely live like kings, *eh Ave María*." The presence of displaced persons in the church with their suffering and need touched our sensibilities profoundly and affected our comfortable way of living. This Cambulos community was saved miraculously from a terrible massacre one night after being settled there a number of years. But on their way the assassins had turned around and went back. God is good and responds to the prayers of his people.

A Moment for Peace

A Justice and Peace Committee was formed in the church. One of the first things that they did was to provide a time for prayer and reflection Wednesdays at noon, called A Moment for Peace. To tell you about this in itself would be sufficient to complete this testimony. However, it is necessary to say that it has been a period of invaluable richness for the church and for those who attend.

We thought that it would be important for us as a peace church and for Mennonite institutions working in the area to have an occasion for a weekly time of prayer for peace in Colombia. It began with a format of thirty minutes of prayer and Bible reading, followed by thirty minutes of reflection on some relevant theme, some work experience, or an analysis of events, etc.

It began to expand from five or six people to 10, 15, 20, 40, 60 and more. Who were those who took part? As Jesus said, "They will come from the north and from the south, from the east and from the west to sit at the table of Abraham..." How interesting the way the New Testament repeats itself in our experience! They were the displaced persons and they told their families and friends that there was a time of prayer for peace. And there were persons who had never been to a church who came to the meetings called A Moment for Peace and discovered a way to be Christian, concerned about social reality, justice, human rights and a new world. They welcomed one another . . . These persons really took over the meeting and they made it their own. It was a time of tranquility, of refreshment, of encounter, of prayers and of the presence God in the midst of a Colombian period of upheaval and heartlessness.

We expected that people related to surrounding Mennonite institutions would see the importance of this moment in the midst of their work, that people dedicated and involved in social justice, would be eager to attend. I even imagined that the directors of these institutions would see the importance of this event and would close their offices to the public with a notice that they were praying for peace. Nothing was farther from the truth. Neither from the institutions located nearby nor from the long-term members of the church was there much attendance. They were either not interested or they did not have the time or energy to attend. They had other priorities or other impediments. Many times in regard to the older members of the church I have thought about the

words of Jesus: “We played the flute for you and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.” On the other hand, maybe it was God’s will that the long-time members of the church not attend. Who knows if the newer members who have taken over this time in the way that they have, would have done so if the older members had participated. At any rate we would need to examine where we are failing by having other expectations, or by not providing an attractive or important space for the others.

And speaking of Abraham’s table, two or three years after beginning A Moment for Peace, we thought that it would be interesting to add at the end of the meetings a simple meal of soup provided for the participating community. For many participants, it could be the first food they had eaten the whole day. The participants were invited to be in charge of preparing the food and they did so. At the end of the Moment for Peace meeting those who attend contribute 500 pesos (about 25 cents USA) if they have it, but if they do not, we make it very clear that there is food for every one. So this time becomes a sign of the generosity of God and the will of the Creator that all of God’s creatures have enough food because he provides generously. It is also a time for sharing, dialogue and mutual support in the midst of suffering and need.

There is not enough time to speak of many other things that are part of the testimony of what the Holy Spirit has done in our congregation, but I cannot overlook one aspect to which I have alluded.

Congregation Accepts Risk

Some time after beginning to assist the displaced persons, people such as Manuel Narvaez began to appear. They were displaced people who even though they abandoned their land, people, work and home towns, continued to be hunted, persecuted and subjected to death threats even here in Bogota.

The Justice and Peace Committee received these people in order to speak with them first hand. Perhaps it was one of the few places where they felt free to share their pain, fear, uncertainty, confusion, insecurity and the terrible burden that contaminates our country. Their stories spilled out in cascades like abominable vomit. It was very important for this to come out.

We listened to them, wept with them, prayed for them, shared with them the Word and the hope of the resurrected Jesus, and we looked for alternatives

for their lives. When necessary we sought a way for those whose lives were endangered to leave the country, because saving lives has been the basic criterion whether they were pursued by the guerrilla, the paramilitaries or the agents of the state. All of these groups were represented. At times with protection funds administered by human rights groups we have been able to obtain for them financial support for a number of months. Also, the Justice and Peace Committee has been able to provide partial, timely economic solutions according to its ability.

I have neither words nor skill to express the tremendous nature of this ministry. According to the dictionary, in Spanish the word *tremendo* means “terrible and formidable, very large or extraordinary that does unexpected things” and all of these things describe what God has done through this ministry. One feels small and wordless in the face of the magnitude of what this means for us. One thing is sure and that is with the passing of the years the Word of the Lord given to me by Ema relating to Teusaquillo as a place of refuge began to be fulfilled with this somewhat silent but very real ministry. Some four or five years had passed....

It is obvious that this work requires constant discernment because these were paths that we hadn't planned or traveled before. There were concerns about security, questions about manipulation, about the adequacy of solutions, etc. The time arrived when the Justice and Peace Committee began to feel uncomfortable, even a bit guilty or uncertain in relation to the church. The reason was because they realized that to a great extent they were responsible for this profound sociological change that had upset the church with the arrival of so many new, needy and persecuted people, leading to the discomfort of some former members who felt not only displaced, but also insecure. Who could tell who attended the worship services? When might some dangerous incident occur? Would our children be secure in this church? Besides, who said that this type of intervention is a work of the church? Would it not be better to stick to something more traditional instead of things that are so dangerous and even political?

So with this burden, the Committee asked for an appointment with the governing council of the church that was composed of five marvelous women, who in their majority were middle-aged, with a great deal of wisdom and Christian dedication accumulated among them. The Committee expressed their

doubts and their hesitations to see what advice the council might give.

These women listened carefully to the confession and then, with the clarity of the Holy Spirit, they said more or less the following: "In spite of the doubts that have taken place in the church, this is from the Lord. This is precisely what the church should do. With these people that have arrived at the church, we have had the privilege of meeting the Lord Jesus Christ, who has come in those who are displaced, handicapped, persecuted, hungry, and incarcerated. These events have renewed the church and permitted us to have a privileged and unequalled ministry. What you have done has been very good." These wise women had seen with astonishing clarity, without hesitation, the visit of the Lord to the Teusaquillo Church and they gave the Committee strength and new energy.

People have come to our church that would be able to hate the guerilla, the paramilitaries, the armed forces, and perhaps others. Possibly, some may have in their past lives been attracted to one of these groups. Possibly, they would have a great deal of distrust towards others in the church. But in the new community of Jesus, they have learned to forgive, and around the Lord's table they have made reality the description given by the writer of Ephesians 2:14: *Christ is our peace. He made the Jews and the Gentiles one single people, destroyed the wall of separation, and annulled in his own body the enmity that existed.*

Several years have gone by since Ema spoke to me that special word, and one day I met her in the airport, and I reminded her of the incident. I explained to her how the Word of the Lord was being fulfilled, the Word that she had not understood, but had not resisted giving, and that we did not resist fulfilling with the help of the Lord. The wisdom and the purposes of the Lord are perfect and have been for the salvation of many people.

Brothers and sisters, there is not enough time to tell you about our marvelous experiences with the work of mutual aid, with street people, with the Bread and Life feeding programs, with the ministry among the prisoners and people with disabilities, and with the peace witness of the church.

Being a Missionary Community

But I would like to mention one more aspect. In the first years of my pastorate, we worked on a declaration of vision for the congregation. It has not been greatly modified through the years. And today, it reads as follows: *We are*

a missionary Christian community of love, that inspired by the Holy Spirit and guided by the Word of God, prays and works that God's will be done on earth as in heaven.

We realized that without special planning in the past, our members had established two new congregations, and for that reason we decided that one of our characteristics was that we were a missionary community. However, again, we did not know God's plans in this respect. Toward the end of the 90s, for diverse reasons, among them the economic crisis caused by neo-liberal politics and economic policies, many people began to leave the country, and among them were people and families from our church. I was concerned because I realized that we were losing leaders, mature people in the faith that could not be replaced from one day to the next. I believe that many churches in our continent have suffered this phenomenon and it has consequences at the levels of leadership, economy, and energy of the local church.

I was in the midst of this period of discouragement when a woman from our church brought a very humble sister from another church to see me. We went into a room and began to pray. In the middle of this prayer, this woman also brought a word from the Lord. One of the things that she said was that I should not be concerned by the departure of people from the congregation (about which I had said nothing) because the Lord was going to bring many people to this congregation, and they would receive training and they too would leave, and the cycle would repeat itself. With this I relaxed. I no longer worried about the people who were leaving.

God has worked precisely in the way she spoke. Many people have scattered who have service and leadership gifts. They have gone to other parts of the world to live in distant places, like missionaries taking with them the vision of the Teusaquillo Church pertaining to the call of God to his people to serve humanity. God has taken them to other latitudes and other churches. Most of them have left as refugees to save their own lives. God has used us as instruments to save many lives. Although these people had lost much, at the time that they were with us and our congregation, they confessed that they discovered something more valuable than what they had lost, for they were found by Jesus Christ and his loving body. They learned to forgive, to leave their past in the hands of God and move towards new horizons that God was opening. In this way, the word of God is fulfilled according to Jeremiah 29:11: *I know the plans that*

I have for you, plans for good and not for evil, in order to give you a future filled with hope.

God has continued to bring people, many people, new people, who come and learn to know Jesus. They are baptized, they learn, they live together, they share their gifts, and then God takes them to other countries. In spite of the fact that the great majority of people that have arrived are without economic resources, who must be helped financially, in all of this God has provided in abundance and in overabundance the resources and the strength for us to do that which has fallen to us to do. All of this is supported with the gifts, the faithful prayer and the faith of the believers.

What this testimony seeks to emphasize is that this awesome even overwhelming arrival of excluded and marginalized people to the Teusaquillo Church, has been a saving experience for the church. It has meant growth, renewal, evangelism, and above all, a beautiful encounter with the Lord Jesus and his Kingdom. We do not have words to thank the precious Spirit of God for giving us this privilege. But we have to admit that most of the things that have happened have not been because of our plans or our foresight. Rather they have been surprising manifestations of the Holy Spirit that found us ready to follow his direction. And this has been our salvation, because encountering Jesus Christ and giving him a place in our community is to permit this community to see his glory full of grace and truth.

Some Reflections and Lessons

It is necessary to be aware of the guidance of God. God has tasks and ministries for our churches if we listen to him. Our plans are less important than God's. God speaks to us in different ways. In this case women were heard, women who were not even a part of our faith community. Obviously it is not only through a voice, but also through happenings that take place in history, in the discernment of groups working together and in other ways – and, of course, the Bible. It is necessary to obey and assume the challenges with courage and dedication. In the end, it is God's mission and he calls us to collaborate.

I believe that every local church has its "angel" (as in Revelation), its charisma and its personality which is also true of every pastor and every person. The challenge is to identify it, embrace it and live in harmony with it. There

should be no effort to try to imitate that of another church or person, because to live in accord with our own personality and call is what provides happiness and effectiveness in mission.

The Acceptance of Rejected People. It seems that every time that in the Bible rejected people are accepted it is for the enrichment, blessing and progress of the saving purposes of God. In the Old Testament the Israelites included in their society the Rahab the prostitute, and Ruth the Moabitess who form part of the ancestry of King David and of Jesus of Nazareth and whose faith was exemplary. When God taught Jonah that the hated Assyrians were also objects and beneficiaries of the mercy and love of God, the prophets began to prepare the way for the universalization of the blessing of God on humanity and the pouring out of the Spirit on all flesh. The early church that accepted Gentiles into their community provided a major step forward in their understanding of the history of salvation and universalized the saving plan of God that now did not exclude those who previously were not a people of God and did not enjoy the grace of God.

The attitudinal and geographical location is significant. God asks the church to be in the world. It is important that the needy have easy access to our churches and meeting places, both physically and attitudinally. It is possible, but not probable, that a congregation will reach out to another area of the city in order to carry out some ministry to which God is calling it. It is more likely that the ministries of the church arise from the people who attend and they reflect its geographical location. It is also clear that by means of public transportation many people outside the zone are able to attend if the contact is there. Nevertheless, it is necessary to reflect on the God of the Bible who is located in the peripheries.

The importance of the older members. On the other hand it is necessary to recognize, as I have said, that older members are also valuable and that it is necessary to find ways to integrate both the old and the new in one single body, the body of our Lord Jesus Christ. There are unacceptable reasons for erecting barriers relating to different persons as, for example fear, social class, image, or because it affects one's power, vested interests or comfort.

Although all people are welcome, there are gradual processes of integration for those who are new. To become a member involves a process. It does not happen all at once. There is the need to take steps. It is a process of

mutual acquaintance. The people arrive with personal interests and needs. Not all remain. Not everyone has a genuine interest in what the community has to offer.

It is also necessary to recognize that there are valid reasons for not accepting certain persons. For example, not everything fits or is valid. The congregation expects changes in life and behavior and there are ethical expectations as well.

The importance of the faith community. It is necessary to be a faith community and engage in mission. The faith community is the expression of Jesus Christ. It is his hands, his smile, and his embrace. The faith community is the entity that provides welcome, inclusion, healing, consolation, encouragement, protection and renewal.

The faith community is a healing community. It really lifts up the fallen, consoles those who weep, prays for the broken, teaches and restores the lost image of God. The faith community provides the protective covering of God for people who are in danger. In our church, although this is another chapter, we have seen how God honors the faith of his people in this respect.

The local church is the primary agent of mission. We have specialized institutions and we thank God for them. We need them. However, it is a temptation to simply transfer the needs that continue to confront the church to specialized institutions because we end up saying: "For this they exist." They can and should help, but the first locus of mission is the local church. It is there that the people arrive, and the contact and the work with them is what transforms the local community.

The church is truly one body united organically with its ligaments, connecting blood vessels, members and organs. One part is joined to another: conversion, discipleship, baptism, growth, mutual aid, counseling, peace and justice testimony, prayer, human rights, miracles, celebrative worship services, music, Christian education for children, youth and adults, social ministries, etc. It all depends on the head, Jesus Christ, and his loving presence in the midst of his people through the action of the Holy Spirit.

Many of the things that have been done in Teusaquillo have been initiatives on the part of persons who have expressed interest and the desire to serve, and the pastor simply upholds them and serves as facilitator. It is

important to recognize and support these gifts and initiatives because it is there that the richness is found.

I want to emphasize the importance of involving new people in the ministries and activities that are within their reach. These new people do many things and their participation is therapeutic and pedagogical.

Conclusion

I will leave for your reflection the question that has to do with polarization between being Anabaptist and evangelistic, between being spiritual and a social activist, between being Mennonite and guided by the Holy Spirit, between horizontal participation and pastoral direction, as well many other dichotomies that we treasure. Are they really necessary? Are they useful?

Do you understand now brothers and sisters why I began with Romans 1:16? *For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.* This is a reality and it is our testimony.

Above all, sisters and brothers, I am convinced that the secret of the gospel is found in Jesus Christ. An Anabaptist Mennonite church is a Christ-centered church. The totality of our being, work and purpose has its origin in Jesus Christ. It exists because of him and for him that he may be known, exalted, and loved.

All that has been accomplished is through the efforts of many people, but above all, it is because God is good. Thank you for sharing this path with our church.