

## India 97 and Global Anabaptist Missions

*Peter Rempel*

The Assembly and the General Council meeting of Mennonite World Conference (MWC) held in Calcutta in January 1997 was marked by several traits which have major implications for the global nature of the community of Anabaptist churches, in particular in their mission.

**1.** The majority of Mennonites and Brethren in Christ now reside in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The center of gravity for Anabaptist theology and mission will also need to shift southward.

**2. The president and vice-president of Mennonite World Conference come from the churches in Indonesia and Ethiopia,** churches which are growing in membership. These leaders from the south can speak about mission with more credibility than those from the north.

**3. The vitality and fervor of spiritual gifts of the southern churches was evident in the worship and the displays. These spiritual gifts need to be** counted alongside financial and organizational resources when considering the resources which the global church has for worship and witness.

**4. The Anabaptist movement is spreading.** There are believers in several more countries who consider themselves to be in the Anabaptist family. Some have already organized for membership in MWC and more will do so in the coming years.

**5.** In the face of the world's anguish and in faithfulness to the Biblical message, **the global body is integrating peace and evangelism, piety and activity,** and surpassing the polarity between these which has developed in the north.

**6.** The number and range of greetings from other Christian denominations at Calcutta are signs of our readiness to be recognized as **ecumenical partners** and to engage in dialogue with other Christian traditions.

With these broader trends as background, the MWC General Council meetings dealt with several matters which will have implications for the patterns and structures of global Anabaptist missions. This author attended the Council meetings as an observer on behalf of the Council of International Ministries (CIM), the associa-

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tion of North American Mennonite and Brethren in Christ mission agencies, and so these observations come from a North American perspective.

The most prominent move toward global Anabaptist mission was approval of the terms for the “Global Church Sharing Fund.” MWC had received about \$900,000 from Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Mutual Aid without instructions on its use other than “to advance the work of the church.” The Council considered a proposal for the fund.

According to the proposal the purposes of the Fund would be: to advance the work of the church; to share gifts across congregational, conference, national and continental boundaries; to transfer money and decision-making power from churches who have more to churches who have less; and to encourage relationships between MWC and member churches.

The responsibilities of the General Council would include approving the guidelines, approving the allocation formula, arranging for “facilitators” to work with recipient churches upon request, and to oversee the management of the fund. The member churches would be responsible to develop priorities, guidelines and procedure for the use of their share of the fund, to distribute, record and monitor the fund and to report on their use to the MWC General Council.

To be eligible for a share of the Fund a church must be a member or associate member of MWC and have fully paid its MWC dues or fair share allocation. It must provide an accurate membership count to MWC and it must not be undergoing internal dispute or conflict with regional leadership that raises questions as to the unity of the conference or the integrity of its leadership. Furthermore, it must be in good standing with its partner churches and agencies, and specifically must not have its funding from these partners suspended or curtailed due to concerns of the partner.

In the Council’s plenary session, the regional caucuses reported on their response to the proposal. Africa expressed gratitude for the fund and its guidelines but recommended that member churches which have not paid their MWC share due to war conditions in their country be granted consideration as well. Asia also expressed appreciation but suggested that the allocation be made on the basis of need, based on the per capita income in a country, or that all MWC member churches receive an equal share of the fund. It was also noted that withholding the allocation from a church because of conflict within its leadership would penalize the church as a whole. Latin America affirmed the proposal as submitted though some LA delegates had also advocated an equal division of the fund to all MWC members bodies. North America reported that it had discussed accountability of recipients for their share but then concluded that the Fund should be treated as a gift and that reports on its use would be received with appreciation. Europe raised the question whether the wealthier churches in Asia would consider declining their allocation, and added that reporting on the use of the fund would provide learnings for all. However, no modifications were formally proposed by the caucuses and eventually the proposal was accepted as presented.

The General Council decided to allocate the fund as follows: \$600,000 to eligible

churches in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, \$200,000 to an endowment fund, \$95,000 to a Gift-Sharing Project and up to \$55,000 for the administration of the fund.

The formula proposed for the main distribution to the churches begins with a base allocation of \$3,000 to each member body of MWC in Africa, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. With ca. 75 member bodies in these continents, ca. \$225,000 would be distributed for the base allocation. The remainder (ca. \$375,000) is to be distributed on the basis of membership. With ca. 450,000 members in these churches, the eligible members would receive ca. \$.80 per person in their membership.

Under the Gift Sharing Project, churches will be invited to give an inventory of the gifts (human resources) which they have to share and also to the list needs which the gifts of other churches might meet. All MWC members may participate in this project and all participating bodies must contribute resources in cash or in kind. MWC, through its executive office, will facilitate these connections and disburse funds to support such gift sharing.

What are the possible implications for CIM and its member agencies? The main distribution of the bulk of the Fund does not involve CIM, its member agencies nor the denominations behind them. The Gift-Sharing Project has the potential of becoming an ongoing fund in which all MWC member bodies, including those in N.A. "may give and all may receive." CIM, its area committees and its member agencies could support this venture by channeling requests and resources for current or new gift-sharing via this MWC project and then by replenishing the financial resources of the fund.

On a more basic level, this Gift-Sharing Project will depend on familiarity of MWC member churches of the gifts of other member bodies. NA churches, and especially the mission agency personnel, have the opportunities for travel and the access to communications which facilitates awareness of the diverse gifts in the worldwide Anabaptist community. However, MWC churches in poorer or more isolated countries lack the information and personal exposure to the gifts available elsewhere, especially in other poor and isolated settings, and are therefore handicapped in discerning which gifts might meet their needs. How could the CIM network be made more accessible to the leaders of MWC member churches outside NA so that they can be well-informed participants in the Gift-Sharing Project.

The use of the endowment portion is to be reviewed at the next General Council. MWC could be encouraged to make all or some of this amount available for common projects on a continental or global level rather than national level. These would become experiments in agreeing on priorities and in cooperating in ministry and thus a further step toward mutual accountability and cooperation in the worldwide Mennonite and Brethren in Christ body.

Consultations or councils on several aspects of church life and work were held in conjunction with the MWC General Council and Assembly: theological education, peace, faith and life, and history. Interestingly, though consultations on mission have

been held at previous MWC assemblies, such a consultation was not held in Calcutta, except for a gathering of mission leaders from the churches related to Eastern Mennonite Missions.

The convening of these councils and consultations indicates the readiness of the Anabaptist churches in countries around the world to consider and to cooperate in these areas on a worldwide and multilateral basis. The traditional bilateral relations between N.A. church bodies and overseas partners, often along historical conference ties and through mission agencies, will need to be set into a broader framework or even diminish as these international forums emerge.

To sustain the momentum toward partnership, MWC and CIM are proposing a “Global Anabaptist Missions Consultation” in conjunction with the MWC General Council meeting in the year 2000. This consultation is intended to propose actual structural and relational changes in MWC, in CIM and in the mission agencies—changes which establish more equitable and holistic partnerships among the Anabaptists churches around the globe.

In Mennonite World Conference we have set the goals of strengthening accountability, cooperation and solidarity in the worldwide Anabaptist family of faith. Striving for these goals will build up our partner churches, open our churches to the gifts of the global church and enhance our common mission of presenting the gospel of Jesus Christ to our neighbors in this world. Mennonites in North America hold some of the keys to the resources, information, relationships and power which could obstruct or support the efforts of MWC and its member churches toward these goals. How shall we act?