

CONVERSATION AND COMMUNITY: SHARING GIFTS IN THE GLOBAL FAMILY

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At its gathering in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe in August 2003, the General Council of the Mennonite World Conference agreed after considerable discussion to add to the organization's official name the subtitle of "A Community of Anabaptist-related Churches." The theme of the Bulawayo Assembly was "Sharing Gifts in Suffering and in Joy." In this brief writing, I want to reflect on how these two ideas – a *community* of churches, and *sharing gifts* – are, or can be, related.

The new MWC subtitle is a symbol of the organization's adoption, after several years of study and consultation, of a new or more clearly articulated identity as a grouping of churches committed "to become mutually accountable to each other and grow in common identity." According to Herman Bontrager, a consultant to the study process, "It moves us from just encouraging mutual accountability to actually practising it."¹

In spite of the often casual use of the word *community* – within the churches and elsewhere – it is in fact a very complex concept with implications at a variety of levels. For example, to speak of a "community of churches" arguably assumes that these churches themselves are communities of congregations, which are in turn communities of families and individuals. In other words, there cannot be a community of non-communities. We might also reflect upon whether, at least when speaking of the church, something of the inverse is not also true. That is to say, a congregation cannot really be community if it does not in some way accommodate (include?) other parts of the church which share basic *common* beliefs and vision.

A body needs all of its parts, and the parts also need each other. The foot is far away from the hand, but despite that distance they need each other. Or put positively, they have something to "give" each other. It is this relatedness that defines the commonality of community.

Through its *Global Gift Sharing* activities and programs, Mennonite World Conference has over the past five years named the theme of *sharing gifts* as something central to the world-wide church community. It is important from the outset to be clear about two things that *sharing gifts* does not mean. First, it does not refer exclusively to the so-called "spiritual gifts," though these are an important part. Second, it is not a euphemism

¹"Mennonite World Conference General Council Charts Direction for Future of Global Organization," *Mennonite World Conference News Release*, 21 August 2003, Strasbourg.

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for material transfers, for giving – though again, this is important. Instead *sharing gifts* is understood as the means – the instrumentality – by which *relationship* – and thereby *community* – happens. To have a relationship with someone means nothing more – or less – than that one *shares* with someone else.

What is it that we share in order to build relationship, or community? Well, it could be almost anything. But perhaps the most foundational form of gift sharing is conversation. Genevieve Vaughan, an American writer on gifts, has argued against the commonly held idea that gift giving and receiving is an *economy* – a reciprocal process whereby a gift given creates an indebtedness that must eventually be acquitted or “paid back” by a return “gift.” In Vaughan’s view this is nothing more than another form of commerce. Real gift giving and receiving is subtly different – something that Vaughan calls “turn-taking.”² The most pervasive form of this gift movement is conversation. In real conversation we offer something to the other person, who receives it, incorporates and transforms it, and gives “back” to us a completely new gift. As the process continues we together build the content of our relationship by the very movement of our sharing, and very soon it becomes impossible to say “this came from you and this came from me.” We are related.

A South African development practitioner, Desiree Paulse, has offered a helpful distinction between *conversation* and *discussion*. The latter is focused on analysis, which involves breaking up and isolating specific points. It is orientated toward an end, a resolution, and therefore easily becomes a competition or a contest with winners and losers. Conversation on the other hand may well bring specific learnings and insights, but these are not endings; they are byproducts of a relationship. Paulse quotes the writer Marjorie Spock saying “*discussions base themselves on intellect, and intellectual thinking tends naturally to separateness. But conversations are of an order of thought in which illumined hearts serve as the organs of intelligence, and the tendency of hearts is to union.*”³

All of this is a round-about way to pose the question, “how do we *converse* with each other in the world-wide church community?” What keeps real conversation from happening? What can help it to happen? I have no answers to these questions, but I am convinced they are among the most pressing questions we must explore as we talk about mutuality and a community of churches. Below in conclusion are several starting reflections.

1. Balance of Power in World-wide Church Conversations

In conversation as everywhere “there is a variety of gifts.” But some conversations can become so imbalanced that they are something less than conversational – at best they

²Genevieve Vaughan, *For-Giving* (Austin: Plain View Press, 1997).

³Desiree Paulse, “Jazzing up the Ancient Art of Conversation,” *CRDA Nugget*, March 2004.

become discussions, at worst impositions of one party's view. This imbalance can make it very difficult for other needed conversations to happen. For the sake of argument I suggest that this is often the case in our world-wide church community.

By way of example, for whatever they are worth, the thoughts I am writing now are not my thoughts, but the product of the amazing access that I as a person in the global north, and as a staff person of a church organization, have to a wide variety of conversations and potential conversations. I have the capacity to engage a vast diversity of people in conversation on an equally vast diversity of subjects. This is so on the one hand for technological reasons, but it is also so because I and others have the "luxury" of being able to focus attention and reflection on issues and concerns without threatening my survival. This is not the case for many in our world-wide community.

2. Pre-Planned Mutuality?

When northern churches and agencies relate to churches and individuals in other parts of the world, we usually do so having already internally processed or conversed at great length about the plans or ideas we wish to "share" with churches elsewhere. "Mutuality" then becomes a very elusive and difficult goal, as the conversation is driven and defined by the ideas we bring (and is therefore often not a conversation at all).

3. Vacating Space for Others' Conversations

We hear often the language of "creating space"; indeed, it is used frequently in Mennonite World Conference. Perhaps what is necessary is not so much the *creation* of space as the vacating of space – of occupied territories – so that other things, other conversations, other ideas, other initiatives, can emerge from other places and other churches. Northern churches and agencies have taken significant steps in recent years to engage and hear voices from the southern churches. But the further step that in large part remains to be taken is to find ways to encourage, to help to make possible, and to allow space for conversations to take place elsewhere, without us, on terms defined and determined by others. These "internal" conversations are an essential part of the real, "conversational" conversations many of us long to have within the world-wide church.

4. Envisioning a Community of Multiple Conversations

I don't doubt that some will want to understand the language of "vacating space" as a language of withdrawal and resignation, hardly appropriate for a "missional" church. But it needs to be understood from the broad perspective of vision rather than the narrow one of strategy. The vision is a community of multiple conversations, where mutuality is a fundamental principle with real content.