

REFLECTIONS ON MENNONITE MINISTRIES

By Waldo Neufeld

Some of the reflections I have on Mennonite Central Committee and the church are somewhat on the critical side. I am not a critical person essentially, but I thought for the reasons that we are gathering in a mission and peace colloquium with seminarians¹, we are not to pat ourselves on the back but to take a serious look at the institutions in the church. I would hope that if some of you are looking for some themes to pursue, some study papers or theses, there might be a germ of an idea that might come forward. Some of these issues I hope to deal with keep coming back in different forms and we need serious leadership from our churches in order to address them.

CHANGE IN THE CHURCH IS CERTAIN

With that introduction, I did want to give you a bit of an overview of my life, which is already quite long – 65 years officially. Enough to say that you have often heard the slogan that there are two things certain in life, death and taxes, I would like to add a third namely change in the church. The latter is probably as difficult to cope with as paying taxes every year. It has been a constant struggle for many, I think. It was highlighted for me just recently when I met a fellow my age who had been an editor of one of the Mennonite publications, and over the years also held pastoral roles. He said in a frustrated voice as we talked about the changes in the church, and our inability to make adjustments, with these words “I have not left the church but the church has left me.” Thinking about that has caused me considerable pain because in that way it reflected a voice of desperation, feeling very good about God’s kingdom work and his part in it, but extremely frustrated at this juncture, that something had gone awry, had shifted. The shifting sand was taking him away from what he thought the church should be all about.

THE RURAL CHURCH OF MY YOUTH

I think it is necessary for you to hear about my early beginnings in the church in order to compare it with where I am today. My early beginnings with the church go back

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Waldo Neufeld, retired and living in Abbotsford BC, spent his career in numerous assignments with Mennonite Central Committee, beginning as a PAX volunteer, later directing personnel services and office administration in the MCC Canada office, as well as interim Executive Director, before serving as Director of MCC BC (1986-1999). In these roles he visited many churches, met many American & Canadian Mennonite leaders at numerous committee meetings, and frequently traveled internationally on MCC assignment.

to southern Manitoba where we were part of a rural farming community. The church consisted primarily of farmers, situated near the well-known international border and Peace Garden. It was a community settled by Mennonites who came there in the 1920s after the revolution and war in Russia and Ukraine. This happened between 1921 and 1929 when large groups of these Mennonites settled in Canada. My parents and grandparents were part of this movement. But some of these groups moved *en masse*, in fact there is one such church community in Kansas [called Alexanderwohl], and there may be others, where the entire village moved out of the Ukraine. They transplanted the entire village philosophy, with the name as well as the design of the church, and a variety of other things. So there was also a strong family feeling within this group. I had a sister and brother-in-law who pastored there for a couple of years and struggled with the task of that church becoming more open to the community, since they continued to remain a very closed community, all related to each other.

Well my experience was somewhat similar in the Mennonite community at Boissevain, or Whitewater Manitoba. There were two major family groupings that settled in that congregation, families that were biologically related. Our family, however, and a few others were not part of that group and so our experience in the church in the early years was in many ways quite difficult and stressful for us children. I still have mental images of us walking down the hallway in the education building and lined along each side were the guys from these two family groups. So as those of us from outside wanted to get to the Sunday school rooms we were bounced back and forth and (enough said). Those are my first impressions of church when I was five or seven years old, obviously not very pleasant. There was another family who also had a boy with a mental disability, a condition that could not be understood in those days, so they got a double dose of discrimination.

There was also a time of transition. My grandfather was an elected minister in their home village in the Ukraine. At that time in our Mennonite history, ordination followed you wherever you moved - you were ordained for life. So he entered this community as an ordained minister, which gave him the right to be part of the ministerial team even though he and our family were not related to the others. Frequently as more lay leaders were elected to the ministerial position, it was quite normal for sons of the ordained ministers to be elected, it was in the genes if you like. Well, two of my grandfather's sons, my father and his brother were elected as ministers in that congregation. For my father in particular, I think it was recognized early on that he had the gift of evangelism and so eventually he became an itinerant minister especially among German-speaking Mennonite churches during the 1950s and sixties. When that began to decline, as English replaced German, his ministry shifted to the Mennonite colonies in South America and Mexico. One of the transitions that happened for us was that a small group within the congregation realized that, since many of us were living quite scattered - 20 and 30 miles away from the church, it would be

appropriate to consider starting another congregation in the Ninga community which was much closer to where we lived.

We exited the Whitewater church and started a new congregation, which was headed by my father. Today there are only about five homes and the grain elevator left in Ninga, and the church building we rented is still there. For me the move was like a breath of fresh air. At that time my father's evangelistic ministry took off and we often referred to him like the geese and wild ducks that disappear in fall and return in spring. So we often thought of ourselves as children of a single parent family. Mother took charge. But missions were very central to father's teaching, so the idea of us taking part in church ministry was planted in our lives very early. Three of the four siblings became involved in the ministry either in pastoral work or other church related work. Not to belittle the one brother who did not, but remained a farmer, and chose to feed us if you like. I still remember how often, because our father was a minister in the church, our family hosted itinerating missionaries who would come to stay at our home.

FIRST MCC SERVICE OVERSEAS

On one of the cold winter weekends, that only Manitoba can provide, a returned MCC worker from Nepal stayed with us. The weather was so bad that we were not able to have a worship gathering so we were confined to the home for several days. Needless to say I was confronted by our guest on a number of locations above getting involved in MCC service as a volunteer. That did happen a few years later, in 1960, when I was called to consider an assignment in Liberia, Africa as part of the PAX service program. The program was specifically designed at that time to respond to the many young Mennonite men seeking an alternative to military service. When MCC finally did call, I had already registered at a Bible College, was there for a week and got acquainted with new friends. I said yes while still on the telephone, then had to go to a map to find where Liberia was since I had never heard of it.

I left a lady friend behind and traveled with five other CO's who had committed to two years of service in western Liberia. I was only there a few weeks when the first wake-up call came for me. Having grown up in the very conservative environment, 'missions' very clearly meant to share the faith and to help the poor in some way, so it was not an issue for me to think of what to do when we got there, even though we had received very little direction as to what our role was to be. We were seconded to an American faith-based organization, the Letourneau Foundation, which had several development projects, one in Liberia and the other in Peru. We had considerable liberty to do what we wanted during our free time beyond the vocational training project, which was our primary assignment. So I immediately got involved with Sunday school, started a male choir, daily vacation Bible school, and held classes for pastors.

One of the things that struck me was that most of the other PAX workers that were with me did not want to get involved, in fact they were very reluctant to do so. For several, their main activity was to mark an X on the calendar so they would know when it was time to go home. It was much later that we were also to learn that MCC was really thrust into a very difficult situation, since the churches, especially in the USA were really pressuring MCC to deliver an alternative service program for their young men. MCC had to deliver, and literally dozens, hundreds of men were placed in projects with inadequate screening. Some had gone through the court procedure to obtain conscientious objector status, others had found an easier way depending on what local judges and military officials were like. In some cases parents simply went in to sign them up as CO's.

I was in Liberia for five years and never met an MCC administrator. That gives you an idea of how loosely things were organized at that time. In the midst of that isolation and often lack of resources, reflecting on what we were doing there I began to think about mission more generally. Especially once you begin to notice and see the effects of oppression and oppressive regimes, it causes you to think. About ministry in broader terms. We noted the lack of resources and jobs in Liberia, even though we had training programs and upgrading education available at our site for about 150 young men and boys. It begged the question, what good does it do? Can Liberians do the jobs or do jobs for them actually exist? So we had to rethink methodology and strategy. At that time I was working in poultry husbandry, and I began on my own initiative to shift the program away from one center, a large production/training unit, which was more the US mindset, and adjusted the program to include programs in remote villages, helping start small poultry village operations to improve their diet and foster some business potential.

It was also during this time that I had my first wake-up call toward critiquing missions. I had always seen missions as going out there and telling everyone about Christ. Inviting people to make a faith commitment. Then I began to observe missionaries of a variety of stripes. One that sticks in my mind was a married couple who had lived there for some 30 years, had a very nice home only a few minutes away from the ocean and the beach. They had several bells positioned at strategic points in the home that they could ring a call to half a dozen servants in the home when they needed food or help of some sort. It was quite an image. In contrast, however, we also saw the strategy of some mission agencies, especially that of the Letourneau Foundation, that was focused on training local leadership. During the tenure of this mission 25 churches were planted by local leaders (in spite of revolution and war still continuing today). That is not to say that some of the tactics this mission used were particularly relevant. They introduced western church culture, which in many cases did not make any sense. But in terms of church life, there certainly was a different approach to what I described by that comfortable missionary couple. I could tell you more horror stories of what mission should not be like, but that can remain for another time.

After two years with MCC in that assignment, I returned home to be married to the lady that I had left behind and returned for another term of 2 ½ years. Following that, in 1965 we returned to Canada, recognizing our need for more education, so we pursued Bible College and university studies. Along with that, I worked in the area of broadcasting, news reporting for radio and television, and directing the religious radio and television programs for the Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren churches, for about 12 years directing Faith and Life Radio/TV and Mennonite Brethren Communications. In 1978 I received an invitation to join MCC Canada staff in Personnel and Administration, and one year as interim Executive Director.

We moved to British Columbia in 1986 to head up the MCC provincial program until four years ago when I retired. I invited the board to take a look at some younger leadership, but they hired someone who was older than I was by one year! Another one of my great ideas did not materialize! Following that I did some contractual work for different church agencies in the area of stewardship education and setting up public relations office, finally retiring in 2003. Now part of our retirement plan - my spouse not yet having reached the magic age of 65 - was to do service projects for four or five months of the year and be available to our grandchildren for the remaining part of the year as long as they are interested in us. That is the reason we are under the SOOP program [service opportunities for older people]. There are about 75 assignments listed in North America where one can volunteer for a month or two.

ISSUES AND CHANGES IN THE CHURCH AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

Now, for some reflections, I will merely float over the 25 years or so that I was involved with MCC. One of the key issues has been and will continue to be *the question of ownership*. In 1963 when Mennonite Central Committee was formed in Canada it should be noted that the key leaders on the executive board at that time would have consisted of the moderators or secretaries of the Mennonite conferences that supported Mennonite Central committee. The top leadership in other words, was there around the table designing the organization and setting priorities about the program. They made decisions and as elected moderators they went back and invited the sheep to follow. There was a lot of strength in that model as there was a high level of trust and accountability.

A gradual shift happened, planned or not, perhaps because of the way we began to understand church more fully as the body, the entire body that needs to become involved. Nevertheless by the early 1980s the board of directors consisted of elected people that were not necessarily directly linked to the church leadership. It should be noted that often these MCC representatives would get scarcely five minutes reporting time at the annual church convention to provide any sort of report and accountability. It does not take a rocket scientist to understand that there was a problem beginning to develop in terms of accountability, if there is not a way of interaction with the constituency. This gave impetus

to a growing church salaried leadership, staff driven agencies with less direct accountability to the church. One of the issues I wanted to raise today is the question of what does this do to the very nature of the church when such a shift happens? From accountability through leadership within the congregations to staff run organizations.

Secondly I want to draw attention to the *professionalism of volunteers*. During the height of the service program in the 1950s and 1960s, persons would apply and be placed. I was one of them, someone who just came off the farm and the experience I received on the farm was my primary qualification. By the late 1970s when I rejoined Mennonite Central Committee in the Canadian office as director of personnel and administration, it was noticeable that there had been a significant shift to professionalism. In other words, assignments would be created and people would be recruited to fill them who met the requirements outlined in the job description. The involuntary message began to circulate that the untrained need not apply. That change was not entirely negative. First of all, there was a large TAP Program (teachers abroad program) which recruited literally hundreds of teachers to various assignments. Then we got into a variety of community development assignments where persons with expertise in agriculture, water development, and forestry were required.

What it did though, as we moved to a professionalism model, was the exclusion of those constituents who wanted to serve but did not meet the qualifications. We were unable to give them an option. When something like that happens, people are frustrated and this pushes them to look for other options. I really think that's what gave rise to a shift away from MCC as a service opportunity agency and a trend of supporting a variety of para-church organizations, affecting both people and money. For example, when I visited congregations in British Columbia as director of MCC, I noted one congregation that did not include MCC in its budget but had 17 other para-church organizations listed in their annual budget. When I probed that matter, it became clear that this had developed because they had congregational members who had gone out under these agencies and needed financial support, hence were included in the budget. Then the budgeted commitment stayed there year after year.

So I used to argue from an MCC point of view that we should have more congregational involvement in sending people so that if an individual was called, they would invite the church as they did on many occasions when I was there, to support them financially. So the congregation became involved that way. That is still an issue today. I think that due to pressure from staff at the grassroots level (I was sometimes in that category too) we were the ones who had to deal with the criticism from people who were looking for service opportunities, and MCC had nothing to offer them. Programs like SALT (serving and learning together) and Discovery Teams were started but I think that for the most part institutional leaders did not want them, designed them because the constituency was demanding it, but did not put their heart and soul into these efforts. So such programs

did not really go anywhere. The tension was real: the learning that the staff and volunteers within institutions had gained from overseas exposure, and the challenge of how do we get that information back to the churches, so that they can become engaged and understand what the institution needs to work with. That continues to be a major point of tension. MCC's reluctance to get into some of the shorter-term programs was for good reasons, but, at the same time the constituency who felt the need to have their young people experience service in some way were then forced to go to different agencies, parachurch organizations that would provide that kind of service option.

The other reason why these programs within MCC did not go anywhere was I think because staff leadership did not want them, so little time and energy was given to make them work. (But the constituency was persistent so that by 2003, the International SALT program was flourishing). But in the early stages of this development there was also a lack of research. In Canada we tried a service and learning program called SALT Canada. The idea was that youth lacked experience for service placement so let's design a combined learning and service program. Young people were recruited at ages 17 and 18 and were put into units of 6-10 persons and placed in a variety of assignments in select Canadian communities. The difficulty was that we were throwing together a dozen kids who did not know each other ahead of time, so there were constant interpersonal relationship problems. If a little bit of advanced research had been done, we would have known that young people of that age, at least at present, wanted good service experiences, that is clear, but they want to do it together with *friends*, together with people they know. Research would have told us to design a program considerably different and invited youth groups from churches, kids who already knew each other, to do an assignment for a year.

DIVERSE CONSTITUENCY

Perhaps it is unrealistic to think that we could combine the theology of seventeen different Mennonite and Brethren in Christ church groups and please them all. MCC also had its partners overseas, Mennonite and other groups, who also needed a voice in the larger picture. So as the program developed over the years to a more professionalized model, I think that the image of MCC began to shift significantly. But for many of the people at the grassroots, the congregations, MCC still remained a relief agency. Even though many years ago MCC had already begun to deal with the root causes of poverty, working at agenda like women's concerns, speaking to government about policymaking that impacted people around the world and empowering local groups to make changes. Conversely constituents would come back and say that 'such matters are controversial and we are not sure whether we should be doing it'. "The Bible teaches us to feed and water people, so why don't you stay with the simple relief program," some voices suggested. For me, working within administration at the provincial level, that was the toughest part of my assignment. To serve

as a bridge for the voices of the overseas partners and for what the donors and sponsors in Canada were saying.

Another spinoff from this dilemma was that institutions developed more power and control through their structures. They increased their public relations and communication staff. They began to churn out news releases and films to sell a certain point of view or path, believing that communication was to educate **them**, a one-way conversation that turned out to be major non-communication. By the 1990s staff knew that there was a problem, when increasingly congregations were doing their own thing and giving was dropping off. Tim Lind and I were commissioned by MCC to do some research on connecting with the constituency, that was the buzzword for a while. We were connecting with people obviously but we were not communicating. We spent a year on the road visiting focus groups, meeting pastors all over US and Canada, asking just a few questions, including what should the focus of MCC be.

Then came another wake-up call. In Oregon where we were touring, one fellow told me that ‘this is the first time that MCC has ever asked me what do I think.’ As we continued in those focus groups we found that answering the question – what does MCC mean to you? – the answers were thrift stores, a relief sale, namely the areas where they could touch and feel it. In many ways I think the train is out of the station on this agenda. To illustrate:

One of the church groups in British Columbia, a Mennonite Brethren congregation, have no budget assigned for their own conference or any conference related mission activity. They have set as a goal for their congregation, consisting of several thousand members, where all are to participate in a missions assignment in Mexico within the next five years. So all their money is flowing in that direction. They are functioning totally independent from institutions or conferences that are Mennonite or Mennonite related. So in some ways, here is the contrast of perception versus reality. They are members of a Mennonite conference but donot support it in any way.

Where are the realities on this question? I think in general I would say that the constituency views MCC as a relief agency, no matter what communication has gone out over the past 70 years. When there are global disasters the money flows to MCC. If there are no disasters, funds dry up. I think that is one way the voice of the constituent is being expressed. It is almost to the point that institutional staff leadership are looking for disasters so that the money will flow.

Yet another issue is *segmentation*. In large part this is a trend that has already happened. There are subgroups in our constituency that support what they can identify with, what they can touch and feel, and they are interested in. This is being expressed in various ways as persons respond to a variety of appeals. If they are concerned about orphans they will find a way to support orphans. If it is health issues, or AIDS education, or whatever the issue is, if they are interested they will find the channel to do it by themselves or through an

agency. So there is a very clear segmentation which is related to my next issue, the myth of the black hole.

I grew up committed to funding missions by giving to a missions pot, a big black hole, assuming that someone somewhere would spend that money wisely. That is a myth by now. People want more hands on involvement with their charitable giving. They want to see results. They want to see evidence that their investment is bringing change. Institutions will need to awake to this in finding ways to relate to the constituency so that they feel more in touch with what they are doing.

We touched on the issue of power and control at last week's colloquium. Tim Lind, with whom I worked on the connecting constituency project, made the comment at that meeting that MCC has hardening of the arteries. He said the staff executive leadership teams has become so entrenched that change is difficult. There is a certain amount of truth in that, I guess any institution can suffer hardening of the arteries. I think an illustration of that would be that every year since I was involved in MCC, I can recall the discussion surfacing and resurfacing about the internationalization of MCC. We need to get going on it, to find a way to internationalize our organization, so that we are not perceived as a North American power structure, etc. There was of course a very strong message coming from the overseas partners, Mennonites and others, who were saying 'you are demanding this and that, how every last penny is spent, you require an OK or approval for every last initiative and program we undertake'.

So that discussion went on and on. I heard some voices saying, let's appoint some token board members from Africa and Latin America. Would that help solve the problem? But the political power and muscling being done by the US as a country around the world had its similarities in the church institutions. The churches in the developing world are calling for internationalization, and that is more than token representation on boards. It's like forming an MCC in Africa where we would simply give a pot of money and they would decide how it could be spent. There may well be other models, but the center of control from North America needs revision. How do we offer common ground, an environment for this agenda to move forward? Maybe it will be through the Mennonite World Conference who seem to be showing significant leadership on this agenda.

In terms of partnerships, I think the future of missions and relationships with brothers and sisters around the world will be directly related to our ability to dream dreams of partnerships between churches in the north and the south, sharing of gifts both ways. That involves acknowledging that God is at work around the world and that we are not bringing Jesus to people. An Anglican archbishop in Port-au-Prince Haiti, Roger Desir, when visiting us some years ago, responded to my question, "What kind of volunteers should we MCC be sending?" He simply said, "I'm not that concerned about whom you are sending, but it will be important that all volunteers who come should get at least two months, sit down in Port-au-Prince or other places in Haiti and take a good hard look and see what

God is already doing.” This was a powerful reminder that we are not bringing Jesus to these countries; He is already there at work. How do we connect with what He is already doing? This I think takes a lot of dialogue within churches where the perception is still very much that missions is bringing Jesus and until *we* do it He is not there.

POLARIZATION

This moves more into the area of relationships with churches rather than about MCC. A think one of the things that I noted in my work with the church when serving with Mennonite Central Committee and also with the Mennonite Church in Canada is an increasing polarization within the church. Therefore it will be increasingly difficult for an agency like MCC to represent all those conference groups. In general terms, the polarization is very much, between fundamentalism and Anabaptism. This has really hit us hard in the West Coast with the debate about homosexuality. This is being used as the tool, which provides local churches with the option or opportunity to withdraw from the Mennonite Church. Some congregations have already done so. Some congregations are still dealing with the issue of whether to remove the name Mennonite from their church name. The well-known writer Tom Sine when speaking to us in British Columbia several years ago said he was quite amazed by the fact that he had finally found a faith community that he thought was following a Biblical understanding of Scriptures, the Mennonite Church. He had found his way into the Seattle Mennonite Church and was feeling so good about it. Yet in the meantime as he moved about he was meeting Mennonites were going the other way.

What does this hold for the future? This needs a lot of discussion. My hunch is that the commitment to peace and nonviolence that we have been known for eons as a Mennonite faith community, may take a completely different form in the future. I’m finding more and more that those who are committed to the way of peace in the world are surfacing in all the denominations and that we may in the future see an Anabaptist grouping coming together that comes out of all the denominations across Canada. Is this what the post-Christian era will look like?

In conclusion let me report a few interesting comments that I received out of hundreds as an administrator with MCC. One person called on the telephone one day who was quite aggravated about our program in the Middle East. He said, ‘you are feeding all these people, you are interfering with God’s plan for the world and the Second Coming of our Lord’. I’d like you to answer that one!

Another one said, ‘why are you always making trouble and talking to and challenging government? We have it so good, why do you want to spoil it?’ Another person called and said, ‘it would be nice if you would also support the Israelis and Jews as you insist on giving all your attention to the Palestinians.’

Well, that's a brief glimpse into my short life. These issues of change in the church will always be there, of course. You younger people need to be part of the process of finding solutions to these issues that I have raised. That is my challenge to you.

Discussion Questions:

Ted Koontz – I heard a basic tension between needing to listen to the North American constituency in order to generate support, and that means their being directly involved with ownership and control, and on the other hand, to think with our international partners who are often not so much interested in our personnel who are short-term people, as they are in having technological help or just money to do what they can do themselves. Maybe I am not interpreting what you said correctly, but that is a tension that I sense. How do we respond to both sides of this dialogue in ways that does not dry up the funds that international folks want, and on the other hand does not perpetuate that flawed missiology - we go out and do things and you receive them?

Walter Sawatsky – can I add a variant on that? The kind of training that I got from Peter Dyck's repetitions to me as my boss in MCC, as well as when I went around to the churches to 'sell the myth', was the importance of the church, meaning the constituency, the congregation, the people. They were right, because the Holy Spirit guided them. I am no longer sure whether the churches, the constituency, the people are right. One of the tensions that I picked up, also from your presentation here, is that you are taking the side of the constituency often, but almost all your illustrations like these last few, suggested they were not right. So can you tie those together?

Waldo Neufeld - I think the way you pose the questions is right on. In the absence of having enough time to deal with all the stuff, I may have swept across some of it too quickly. I think that the difficulty over the 25 years of my involvement with MCC, was our inability to communicate these issues to the constituency, to bring them along as much as we could. Was it possible, necessary and right to bring them along? We mainly left this out in large part when addressing the constituency. Maybe it was due in part to this strategy and bigness of attempting to appease such a large church base, maybe it is an unrealistic objective. Somehow, there were pockets of people or individuals who could begin to understand that the overseas partners were important in this picture, but somehow I guess the tension and dilemma that I highlight here, is that we have not been able to do it. Also we perpetuated the myth at times, because we needed to raise support and money.

It has been an unrealistic goal to think that we could, but, just as illustration, take this person in Oregon. If this person had never been asked this question before, then there is something wrong with the picture. But even with a shift away from key executive leadership in the 1960s, to a kind of nonchalant attitude – we will appoint some people [to the MCC Board] but never given them a chance to feedback or to engage the constituency in a heavy discussion about how do we do mission, how to give credibility to our

international partners. 'Do you feel OK about just giving them money as opposed to us choosing what they should do'. We did not get that discussion off the ground, I don't think. We thought that by telling them what they should do it was enough, but we all know that communication needs to go in circles, it is not one line going in one direction.

Walter - Why did the shift take place? Why was it that the Board members of MCC were increasingly less church leaders?

Waldo - Sometimes I thought it may be related to shifts that were happening in the church. In the fifties and sixties for example, there was a strong movement in eliminating the bishops as power centers in the church. In our community, there were seven churches and we had one elder (bishop) who was over all those seven churches. He had a certain amount of control but it also brought certain continuity because the seven churches were working together on issues. I think the general thrust of our society was against that model, and congregations began to move toward autonomy. Autonomy is what we surely have right now in western Canadian Mennonite churches, where the local church is the center for everything. We have now reaped the benefits of those decisions made in the fifties to eliminate a strong center and I am not saying that was necessarily evil, but I think that happened and affected the institutions. It's like trying to find a moderator for a church conference now, it is getting increasingly difficult. One has to ask the question why. I think it is our attitude, worldview, or mindset, that we are on a level playing field where each knows what is best, so strong church autonomy developed which we are struggling with in British Columbia currently, as we are dealing with the issue of homosexuality.

A FINAL WORD

I really cherish Mennonite Central Committee and the church. I sometimes say, God willing and the kingdom work survives in spite of our human frailty. I would encourage students to be engaged in church work in some form. We need strong leaders, visionary persons, strong pastors as never before. I think you as seminary grads in the near future can give direction and helpfully bring some of our people back to a strong commitment to the way of peace, community and justice. One of our board members in British Columbia, a retired military person from the Second World War, and a strong peace person as a result of that experience, traveled around North America on behalf of MCC with his peace message. He told his story but came away after several years quite discouraged. This area needs a lot of work. To communicate God's love and to encourage people to embark on that journey of faithfulness, to invite people to walk in solidarity with the resurrected Jesus. Shalom.