

THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA AND MENNONITE CHURCH CANADA: A PROPOSAL FOR DIALOGUE

Ecumenism is at the very heart of Anglicanism, and one of our tradition's distinctive marks has been our willingness and capacity to speak with other Christians from a diverse variety of backgrounds, and to seek reconciliation with them. Anglican churches have formed a part of the modern ecumenical movement from its very beginnings.

For Anglicans, the goal of ecumenical engagement is "the full visible unity of the church in order to be a living expression of God's purposes for the reconciliation of the whole of creation." This visibility is to be expressed "in one eucharistic fellowship, sharing one proclamation of one faith, with one ministry in the service of the gospel, and oriented towards mission."¹

The Anglican Church of Canada, in particular, has a long-standing commitment to ecumenical dialogue. Charter members of the Canadian Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches, we are also engaged in formal conversations with the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the United Church of Canada. After years of fruitful theological dialogue with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, our two churches entered a relationship of full communion in 2001. In 2004 our church officially recommitted itself "to continue the ecumenical faith journey, in which we discover in sign, symbol, and practice God's presence in ourselves and in others."² This was further affirmed in 2010 when the General Synod stated that to "be leaders [...] in ecumenical actions" is one of our church's seven priorities.³

One expression of Christianity with which our church has never engaged in formal conversation is the Mennonite tradition. This is despite the fact that the English Reformation and Anabaptism both emerged out of sixteenth-century Europe, and today many Canadian Anglicans and Mennonites live and work as neighbours. From the perspective of the Anglican Church of Canada, this may be an opportune time to enter into a particular kind of theological dialogue with our Mennonite sisters and brothers.

Why Mennonites, and why now?

The Anglican Church of Canada is in the process of acknowledging and adapting to a new context, one characterized by a diminishment of resources, influence, and status. No longer holding a privileged place in Canadian society, we exist as simply one religious option among others in a society that is increasingly embracing no religion at all.⁴ This religious paradigm shift for Canadian Anglicans—sometimes referred to as "post-Christendom" or "post-Constantinian"—has been compared to the experience of the Israelites during their Babylonian exile:

Just as the people of Judah in exile learned to live without the stability of the temple and the security of the city's walls, so the people of the Anglican Church of Canada are

¹ "Four Principles of Anglican Engagement in Ecumenism," in *The Vision Before Us: The Kyoto Report of the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations, 2000-2008*, Sarah Rowland Jones, ed. (London: Anglican Communion Office, 2009), p. 31.

² "Towards a Renewed Ecumenical Strategy," vision statement adopted by the Council of General Synod, March 2004.

³ *Vision 2019: A Plan for the Anglican Church of Canada*, adopted by the General Synod, June 2010, p. 17.

⁴ Ryan MacDonald, "Canadians losing their religion and other survey highlights," *Globe and Mail*, May 8, 2013, accessed 7 August 2013, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/canadians-losing-their-religion-and-other-survey-highlights/article11778320>.

challenged to find faithful patterns of life and witness in a church that has lost the stability and security much of the church enjoyed just two generations ago. [...] The exile was a real and traumatic dislocation for the citizens of Jerusalem as it is for many Anglicans today.⁵

In contrast, Mennonites have often existed as a church on the margins, both historically and in the contemporary Canadian context. Their conviction that “conformity to Christ necessarily implies nonconformity to the world”⁶ has over the centuries put them in conflict with wider society and other churches, sometimes resulting in persecution. The Mennonite tradition’s particular commitment to peace, justice, and non-violence frequently puts it at odds with the predominant culture, yet it remains a faithful and vibrant expression of the Christian faith.

As the Anglican Church of Canada enters a new stage of its life, we ask if there is something we can learn from our Mennonite sisters and brothers about living faithfully as disciples of Jesus on the margins of society, recognizing that “to live old patterns in this new reality trifles with the truth of our circumstances.”⁷

An ecumenical ‘gift exchange’

It has become increasingly common in the ecumenical movement to talk about dialogue between churches as an “exchange of gifts.” Pope Francis has evoked this image in noting that ecumenical dialogue “is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us.”⁸

This understanding of ecumenical conversation as a mutual offering and receiving of gifts has recently been developed into a method known as *receptive ecumenism*—a “JFK-style” reversal of the customary approach of inter-church dialogue: “Ask not what your ecumenical others need to learn from you; ask rather what your tradition can learn and needs to learn from your ecumenical others.”⁹ It is a method of ecumenical dialogue that holds to full communion among the divided churches as our ultimate aim, while at the same time recognizing it is a goal which lies further in the future than perhaps first hoped. In the meantime, other forms of ecumenical dialogue are possible and, in fact, are prerequisites to the revealing of the church’s full visible unity.

Adopting the open and humble stance the receptive ecumenism method demands would allow us to ask our Mennonite brothers and sisters what we may have to learn from them about being a church “without the stability of the temple and the security of the city’s walls.” Mennonites have been attempting to live out their Christian faith outside the privileged confines of Christendom for their entire 500-year history. Are there gifts Anglicans can receive from Mennonites as we learn to move beyond being a church of the “empire”?

The ecumenical gift exchange is mutual, and it would be for Mennonites to discern which gifts Anglicanism may have to offer their tradition. One possible area to explore would be the rich liturgical and sacramental life characteristic of Anglican Christianity, at a time when many Mennonites are seeking to reclaim a deeper understanding of these aspects of an ancient common Christian tradition.

⁵ *Vision 2019*, p. 7.

⁶ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995), p. 65.

⁷ *Vision 2019*, p. 17.

⁸ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, §246.

⁹ Paul D. Murray, “ARCIC III: Recognizing the Need for an Ecumenical Gear Change,” *One in Christ* 45 (Winter, 2011): 209.

The proposal

Our conversation partner in this proposed dialogue would be Mennonite Church Canada. The largest organized expression of the Mennonite tradition in this country, it has 31,000 members in more than 225 congregations. It is a church with whom we already share ecumenical relationships as fellow members of the Canadian Council of Churches and KAIROS (through the Mennonite Central Committee).

An initial and informal overture about initiating this dialogue has been positively received by Mennonite Church Canada's Executive Director, Dr. Willard Metzger. We envision a face-to-face dialogue meeting once annually for a fixed period of approximately five years, with the possibility of virtual meetings in the interim. The dialogue would consist of five suitable representatives from each church, plus the support of a staff person from each denomination.

Recognizing the need for good stewardship of our churches' resources, we would explore creative ways for the dialogue to meet physically, including partnering with Anglican and Mennonite institutions of higher learning found in the same city, such as in Winnipeg and Waterloo.

If initial planning and approvals are put in place in the coming months, both churches could be in a position to formally launch this new bilateral ecumenical dialogue with motions at their respective national gatherings (the Anglican Church of Canada's General Synod and Mennonite Church Canada's Assembly), both of which meet in the summer of 2016.

An opportunity

This proposal offers the Anglican Church of Canada an opportunity to:

- **Affirm our long-standing engagement in the ecumenical movement, in particular our commitment to "discover in sign, symbol, and practice God's presence in ourselves *and in others*";**
- **Establish a new relationship, "oriented towards mission," with a Christian tradition with whom we have never been in formal dialogue, but one whose members many Anglicans in Canada encounter regularly in their daily lives;**
- **Employ an emerging method of inter-church dialogue, receptive ecumenism, by which both our churches might offer and receive gifts from the other to help us become more effective agents of God's mission in and for the world.**

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