

UU Presentation – Who are the Mennonites?

February 28, 2016

Leona and I thank you for a friendly reception, great programs and friends.

Has anyone ever said to you – “You do not look like a Unitarian?”

I have often been told that I do not look like a Mennonite - even in this congregation – so people have a pre-conceived perception as to what a Mennonite is or believes or should look like.

A little reality check....

This Sunday morning Mennonites will worship in approximately 100 countries in at least that many languages.

Major cities like Vancouver will host services in a dozen or more different languages.

Mennonites will worship in North American mega churches as well as in remote villages in sub-Saharan Africa.

In terms of racial identity possibly only 40% will have a European background

The largest church in Ontario is Anabaptist and will project its services electronically into a dozen sites – the pastor has long hair, wears jeans and rides a Harley.

At the same time there will be services in rural Mexico or Pennsylvania where sermons written a couple of centuries ago will be read by men with beards and traditional dress.

Some services will feature bands that would do well in a jazz competition, others will sing soberly to the accompaniment of a Steinway or organ and some will sing a Capella without a single musical instrument.

The original name or identity for the group now known as Mennonite was Anabaptist. Remember the group originated at the dawn of the Reformation in a totally Catholic world and the term comes from the practice to be baptized again as an adult based on freedom of informed choice. Adult members plus associated adherents such as children now number 4,000,000 globally – double the membership of 50 years ago. Although many denominations are shrinking, the Mennonite community is growing but much of the growth represents the more conservative groups with large families or international churches like Ethiopia.

The various Mennonite-related groups in the US collectively represent the largest single national population but Canada has many more Mennonites as a proportion of its population. The fastest growing churches are in countries like Ethiopia, the Congo, India, Indonesia and surprisingly Laos.

Mennonites or Anabaptists are a product of the very early Reformation and in all cases took the point of view that neither the church bureaucracy as in Catholicism or the Prince or town authority as in the movements established by Luther and Calvin should determine the belief of its citizens. They were the genuine radicals and free thinkers of the Reformation, promoted separation of church and state and were seen as a threat by all of the other groups. The result was persecution which destroyed much of the original intellectual leadership and forced believers into hiding or migration to less violent locations.

The effect was predictable – a radical group shorn of its leadership may resort to efforts to maintain its belief, practices and identity – and in the absence of leadership may become conservative.

The Swiss believers retreated to remote Alpine valleys while Flemish believers such as my family threatened by the rule of Spain and the Inquisition migrated to Danzig and other more liberal Hanseatic locations. Eventually the Swiss believers were physically expelled from Switzerland and were fortunate to have Pennsylvania as an alternative – and became the Mennonites most of you know and identify with. They have enjoyed 3 centuries of mostly peace and some degree of isolation.

The other major Mennonite group was Flemish or Dutch and many migrated east to Hanseatic Cities and the Vistula Delta and experienced moderate liberty (if you exclude all of the wars of those times) until Frederick the Great was unimpressed by their pacifism. Southern Russia became an alternative when the German Czarina Catherine the Great expelled the Ottomans and invited the Mennonites and others to populate and hold the newly conquered lands. That narrative represents my personal story.

The Russian experience was very positive until the catastrophe of WWI and the Bolshevik Revolution. The result was our own version of the holocaust. A portion had migrated before WWI and others like my family escaped in one way or another during the period of turmoil. These collectively became the other major identifiable group of European Mennonites and are internally known as Russian Mennonites – although the group has very little Slavic blood but did pick up a wonderful cuisine.

The group that remained in the Netherlands prospered during the golden Age of that region and over time integrated with the rest of the Dutch. The group that remains continues to self-identify as Mennonites is considered the most liberal religious group in the Netherlands in terms of social and political attitudes – quite an achievement among the already very liberal Dutch!

The Mennonite name came from the name of Menno Simons – a converted Catholic priest who provided leadership during the early years of persecution. As a result they were called by others as the “followers of Menno.” It is interesting that even the Swiss adopted this name but the Dutch never did and a translation of their name refers to its origins “Inclined to baptize.”

Mennonites generally do not have centralized leadership and this creates plenty of opportunity for fragmentation based on differences of theology, dress, geography, language or music. What is amazing however is that when you align the core theological beliefs they have remained remarkably similar allowing the groups to work together in areas such as social justice or efforts to promote local or global Peace.

Many will recognize the work and reputation of the Mennonite Central Committee supported by most Mennonite Church groups. Leona and I are alumni of that organization and our first assignment related to international social justice was with MCC in Bangladesh after the 1971 Civil War. Others will recognize the work of Mennonite Disaster Service, the retail stores of Ten Thousand Villages or MEDA – Mennonite Economic Development Associates - a pioneer in Microfinance.

WWI created a crisis for Mennonites who at the time were still very rural. Since most were practicing conscientious objectors there was a popular view that Mennonites did not support their nation. MCC was developed out of the wreckage of WWI in 1920 and continues to operate across the world. Many Mennonite churches pioneered in the development of health facilities, senior and mental health programs, mediation and many other social and peace initiatives.

Following WWII the Mennonite Community developed an initiative for young people to model the experience of young men being drafted into the military by developing the PAX Corps as a form of global service. You might note that the name Peace Corps sounds rather similar and is in fact a takeoff from the Mennonite initiative.

The end of colonialism had a dramatic impact on the relationship between the parent proselytizing churches of North America and Europe and the churches in newly independent post-colonial countries. Outcomes were predictably variable but several national churches celebrated their independence and developed aggressive church growth movements within their ethnic groups or nations.

Mennonites do not have anything approaching a Pope or even a global Synod. We do have an organization with the name Mennonite World Conference which meets every 6 years and is essentially a global celebration of culture and people but does serve to bring disparate groups together through personal interaction. Recent global conferences have taken place in Zimbabwe, Paraguay, Calcutta, Brazil and Pennsylvania. Recent leaders have come from Indonesia, Zimbabwe, America and currently Columbia.

Global dispersion, cultural influence and leadership have pushed various parts of the group in very different directions. The horse and buggy Mennonites in Eastern Bolivia or Belize are doing well in terms of numbers but remain very culturally conservative. The Conservative group that moved into the challenging Chaco or Green hell of Paraguay conquered that difficult land and today enjoy an average income 16 times as high per capita as the rest of the Paraguayan population. Eastern US or Swiss Mennonites have remained challenged by American culture while Western US Mennonites of Russian origin have moved much more into the US mainstream. In Canada the Russian Mennonites of the far West identify with the evangelical wing of Christianity. The Prairies tend to be more liberal – the opposite of US geographical culture and in Eastern Canada they tend to be more socially conservative – with exceptions like the Harley rider. Some global groups have tended to a charismatic style, while others focus on missions or social justice.

Internationally churches will often be mission-oriented but also are known for their work with health, development and social justice.

There is no church requirement to tithe but virtually all Mennonite communities and groups are leaders in the support of various causes. The generosity of Mennonites shows up on Canadian geographic tax donation statistics.

The Mennonite Community has experienced a great deal of group and individual trauma. Virtually all Russian Mennonite families have a personal or family story of persecution, war, dislocation, famine or flight and this leaves its marks. The International churches are dealing with the trauma associated with the post-colonial experience and when I mention countries such as Ethiopia, the Congo, Zimbabwe or Central America no details are necessary. Groups and individuals respond differently and this creates stories where the response to this stress has been very negative – in other cases there are heroic responses.

The point is that any stereotype any of you have of the term Mennonite or the Community is probably true – but represents a very incomplete picture of the totality of the Community.

Leaders of the various Mennonite groups make every effort to retain the elements of the Mennonite traditions that reflect our uniqueness but more important our contribution to the essence of Christianity. The idea of pacifism or non-violence developed at the earliest stage of our tradition when it

was noted that every form of Christian was killing every other kind and justifying the act. The early Anabaptists concluded very quickly that you could not justify the killing of your fellow Christian and that has developed into a comprehensive philosophy of non-violence. This has profound implications for the promotion of Peace and techniques like conflict resolution and mediation.

Another description of Mennonites has been the term “People of the Book” and the group is very biblically oriented. The selection of Matthew 25 as a reading this morning was deliberate.

The second reading was taken from the writings of Menno Simons and is frequently quoted. Note how closely it follows Matthew 25 with the emphasis not on theology but on the practice of being a Christian.

At the practical level this expresses itself through the support of international development, Peace initiatives, work with refugees, Mennonite Disaster Service and similar organizations. Many groups are active in global Missions and others in the local development of new churches. Biblical literalism can also be a cause for division and disagreement.

My personal story is a parallel of our communal experience. The ancestry of my father is Flemish and we can trace our roots back to the Reformation. The family left Catholic territory and became grain merchants in Amsterdam. In 1580 part of the family relocated their enterprise to Danzig or what is today Gdansk. After 200 years of experience ranging from brandy distilling to lace making to becoming an orphan - a member of my family relocated to the Southern Ukraine with the first group to accept the invitation of Catherine the Great. The family prospered and were grain millers when WWI and the Bolshevik Revolution intervened. My father’s family had the foresight to escape to Mexico although it also meant poverty. My father grew up as a shoeshine boy on the streets of Ensenada.

My Mother’s story was similar until the War. Her family stayed and experienced Stalinist repression. Together with two University friends she managed a story-book escape through China in 1931 and all three became Academics in America.

My parents met as refugee children in Russia during WWI and by accident in Minneapolis 20 years later – and then we became a Canadian family. Many Russian-Mennonite families have stories of persecution and survival. This family and personal history is part of the reason why I have dedicated much of my life to working with international development, refugees, immigration and Peace issues. Leona did not grow up Mennonite but shares an Eastern European background. Her family was able to emigrate under somewhat more normal circumstances.

I decided to study in the United States for a second degree. These were the mid-sixties and attending a very liberal and activist Mennonite College exposed me to the Anti-War and Civil Rights Movements. I visited Koinonia Farms in Southern Georgia, the birthplace of Habitat for Humanity and participated in many rallies and events – including the Selma-Montgomery march. The reward was an FBI record which destroyed my security clearance in Canada and my position as a future Canadian diplomat. These circumstances contributed to a decision to attend Harvard Business School to learn how to make enough money to be independent. Leona and I were married just before Harvard and we have shared our values and our experiences – although Leona is a musician and an artist.

Since Harvard my life has been composed of dual careers in business and a variety of engagements related to international development, refugees, education and Peace. My business is in manufacturing and real estate. The furniture business operates in North America and Asia and currently the largest number of employees are located in Mexico. I spent the early part of this week in northern Mexico participating in our semi-annual management retreat. Business has given me financial freedom plus the

resources to support many of my own ideas. Business has also given me entry into organizations such as the World Economic Forum in Davos and the Trilateral Commission – access that would have been unlikely without the business card. Although much of my time is spent away from the business, it is important to me. Our company has been a leader in the employment of immigrants and refugees with special programs to assist in their integration. In April we will receive an award as one of the best-managed companies in Canada. We have had a corporate policy for decades of donating in excess of 10% of pre-tax income to support various causes. We have chosen to remain a private enterprise precisely to avoid having Wall Street values imposed on us.

The first major international experience was as Director of the Mennonite Central Committee program in Bangladesh immediately after the Civil War of 1971. The assignment was to help restore agriculture – plus we played a role in keeping the one million political refugees alive. Leona was active working in the camps with the Sisters of Mother Teresa to rescue the most vulnerable children. We adopted our two children in Bangladesh. That experience was a foundation for a career that would touch on many of these issues.

The next intervention was to start the Canadian Foodgrains Bank – unknown to Americans – but a large independent private donor of emergency food aid and promoter of food security in the world.

Next we became involved with the boat people crisis and spent time in the camps of Asia. That led to involvement on the Cambodian border in 1980 when VietNam invaded and created another huge refugee crisis. My role was as one of the leaders of the landbridge program to resupply Cambodia through the jungle and enemy lines. My role there and frequently was as a rogue actor since I had independent resources and did not need a salary – something that can be an advantage in many emergencies.

The successful and popular Canadian private sponsorship of refugees was a product of that emergency and is finding a new life with Syrians.

The Cambodia experience resulted in an invitation by the United Nations to assume leadership of the refugee program in Somalia at the time when Russia and Cuba were supporting the Ethiopian regime. I never applied for the position but they needed someone who could act independently and did not have to be concerned about the impact on his career. I was a colleague of Kofi Annan on that assignment.

The experience in the Horn of Africa resulted in assignments in Ethiopia and Sudan. Our group predicted the Ethiopian famine 8 months before it was a public event – even to location. Famines are seldom a surprise – they are generally the product of politics, dysfunctional policies and especially war – sometimes assisted by drought. When you saw the news of the famine on TV – the only ship with grain anywhere in the region was a ship from the Canadian Foodgrains Bank – all other donors had cut off aid. We never learn that sanctions mostly hurt the vulnerable – equally true today.

A significant product of the Somalia experience was an agency named IDE – or International Development Enterprises – an agency that does excellent work around the world in irrigation management and sanitation - based on entrepreneurial principles.

In 1989 Leona and I were invited by senior Russian diplomats to return to our family roots and contribute to the emerging changes in Soviet society. This resulted in several years of intense engagement throughout the Perestroika Period and the time following. We organized 4 national Conferences on Business and Ethics, printed Bibles on a Communist Party press, introduced high tech farm equipment into the dry steppes of the East – and also started a private University. LCC

International University is a private, Christian, English-speaking Liberal Arts University in Klaipeda, Lithuania. When we started there was no Lithuania. Today the University is accredited in Europe, has a modern campus and serves students from 28 countries, mostly the challenging former pieces of the old Soviet Union. We remain engaged and will attend our next Board meeting in Lithuania in another month. A notable moment of our Soviet experience was the coup of 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed. Leona and I were both inside the barricades with Boris Yeltsin – I was determined to see the end of the Soviet Union although the outcome that night was somewhat in doubt. I did play a very minor role in those events – the pamphlets distributed in Moscow to call people to the defense of Yeltsin and the revolution were printed on a press I had supplied to one of the dissidents.

In more recent decades my efforts have been involved more with policy work. My most useful engagement has been with the development of coherent immigration policy for our region in Canada and participation in the United Nations and other processes to develop better ideas related to immigration and refugees.

The current debate in the USA calls for a comment on immigration. The Province of Manitoba has pioneered a different approach to immigration and currently receives legal immigrants at the rate of 500% of the US rate on a per capita basis. The program is so well received that at the next election politicians will compete as to who can increase the flow of immigrants to Manitoba. Intelligent immigration is possible.

Leona and I often travel together and she is engaged in many aspects of these projects including active Board membership, hosting and help in fund-raising.

The current most active project is in the Middle East. Together with LCC University we are establishing a satellite campus in Tbilisi, Georgia to assist students from Syria and Iraq whose studies have been disrupted by war. The objective is to prepare these students for transition to Western Universities. We have made a number of trips to the region and I returned from Kurdistan ten days ago. A report on that visit could occupy the entire morning.

A report such as this fails to transmit the dimensions of the human tragedies behind every situation. There were one million Bihari refugees in Bangladesh – 43 year later 250,000 still live in atrocious conditions with no citizenship, support or ability to tell their story. They are a people forgotten by the world.

The Cambodians who experienced the horrors of the Khmer Rouge and then became pawns in the great game between world powers. Many of us may not realize that our Canadian and American Governments recognized the Khmer Rouge as the official Government of Cambia 8 years after their defeat – greatly complicating the situation for the refugees and Cambodians.

The people of the Soviet Union who did not cheer when the Soviet Union collapsed – because they had little confidence that the future would be better.

The millions of Syrians whose lives and future have been totally disrupted. They are not fleeing to Europe for personal safety – they are searching for a future for their children.

Last week in Kurdistan I visited the Christian refugee camps. They fear that the communities that have survived every challenge for 2000 years now have no future.

The Yazidi camps are even more traumatized. We visited a camp where virtually every family has lost a daughter or family member to sexual slavery.

My interest and passion for the work with development or refugees has undoubtedly been influenced by my exposure to these issues through the Mennonite church and community. The personal experience of family where parents and children were themselves refugees undoubtedly played a role. When you become engaged and the people become individual and real it develops into a personal passion.

The Mennonite Church and Community is diverse. There are many individuals with an engagement and passion that results in the active pursuit of social justice. Others live their lives quietly and like any group of people – some are oblivious to the issues of this world.

To return to the beginning – The Mennonite Community lends itself to certain stereotypes but any one of them is an incomplete picture of this diverse, growing and changing Community.

I was born into a Mennonite home and Community but the decision to remain part of that Community was deliberate. We all live within a tradition or view of the world and I felt that Mennonite values and history were a powerful perspective from which to negotiate life. Leona joined the group through marriage but with conviction and has grown to appreciate the strength of a people and a Community.

The next time you see an opera star at the MET, Premier of a Canadian Province, the CEO of a major corporation or even the Secretary General of NATO, you might ask if they are Mennonite or have Mennonite roots. If you find workers in refugee camps, negotiating Peace or cleaning up after a Disaster – you might also find Mennonites among them. Your quiet neighbor or colleague at work may also be a Mennonite.

We are a diverse group but consider ourselves part of the larger Christian family and global citizens. Many find the ethnicity and Community confining and choose a different identity – but we have chosen to see it as a source of strength. As a Community we share a common desire to live in Peace and to contribute to a better world.

Thank You

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