

An Appeal for Healing and Hope for the Future of Mennonite Church USA from Younger Church Leaders

Mennonite Church USA finds itself in a time of significant cultural and religious upheaval. The effects of this upheaval are evident in the fracturing of the body in recent years. Without refocusing our agenda as a denomination, we could well remain paralyzed by our struggles and diminish for the next 50 years in our controversies. For too long, we have sought to preserve our denomination by the assumptions of a single, dominant ethnic heritage and allowed ourselves to fracture by being unable to manage our disagreements. Without changing our current trajectory, we know where this cultural and religious struggle will lead us.

The question that continues to nag within our minds, hearts and imaginations is, “What if?” What if we actually spent *all* of our energy trying to live into our shared vision statement? Our shared vision is a theologically rich statement that can provide us with clear direction for healing our fractured church. We long to see where a laser-like focus on our vision statement could take us. It is time to rediscover the heartbeat of the healing- and-hope-filled aspirations of the Mennonite church. We are calling CLC and the Executive Board to lead the denomination by investing every ounce of energy we can muster on those things that are *central to*, not merely consistent with, our vision statement for the next five years. We are sounding the call and inviting all who want to join in this vision to come along. We are asking our leaders to lay aside issues that persist in dividing us for the sake of being renewed in the call of the gospel to new life in Jesus Christ.

We are calling for a season of renewed commitment to our shared missional vision:

God Calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace so that God’s healing and hope can flow to us through the world.

We acknowledge the passion, energy and sense of urgency that surround the variety of debates in the church today. We also acknowledge the great sense of loss and hurt that will be felt from moving away from the variety of issues that divide us. However we believe it is necessary to commit to the shared vision as the one possible thing that can unite us.

Making such a commitment, we can live harmoniously with those who will not answer this call. At the same time, we need not be distracted by the agenda that keeps us from pursuing our church’s foundational call.

In the midst of this cultural, religious struggle, we ask our church to confess two key tendencies that contribute to the fracturing of our denomination.

- 1. Spiritual Negligence:** We have ignored the Spirit’s presence and Christ’s ownership of the church. Instead we pursue a vision for our church that reflects “my” interests and a life with others who hold my preferences. We have forgotten that the Church was created for God’s mission. We have allowed our best energies to be consumed by trying to resolve theological disagreements. Further we presume that we can resolve all ethical matters

through our own intellectual prowess rather than trusting in the empowering Spirit of God to transform our body into the likeness of Christ.

- 2. Tribalism:** We reinforce distinctive traditional Mennonite identities at the cost of the calling Jesus gave us: to bear witness to the kingdom and make disciples. We are focused on preserving religious assumptions and forms of community that have been constrained by ethnic migration patterns rather than seeking to be communities where spiritual transformation is regularly seen. We celebrate certain cultural expressions of our tribal communities but have forgotten the proclamation that “Jesus is Lord.” This radical claim of the disciple community is the primary foundation for our common life.

Realigning Toward Vision and Away from Negligent and Tribalistic Tendencies

An increased reliance on our vision statement will enable our leaders (at all levels) to respond reflexively and habitually to God’s call rather than reacting to the more temporal expectations that arise from the denomination’s constituency. A singular focus on our vision statement will enable us to renew the identity of our Mennonite church as followers of Jesus Christ. Realigning our denomination with our vision in more basic ways will enable us to renew our reliance on and trust in the power of the Holy Spirit for a vital future. In doing so, we will be transformed by the Spirit, rather than through our own striving. Growing as communities of grace, joy and peace is simply the natural outcome of this transformation. We are calling the CLC and Executive Board to lead the denomination through a five-year process of focusing every ounce of energy and resources only toward those things that are *essential* to living our vision statement fully.

As leaders ourselves, we recognize the inherent difficulty in leading with vision. It is our perception that Mennonite Church USA leaders have become consumed with crisis management and regional and local interventions in recent years. Currently, denominational leadership seems to be one crisis away from not responding “correctly,” in a timely enough way, or with enough care. This sacrifices the important for the urgent. Our Purposeful Plan and the Vision Statement, which intended to move our church toward a missional future, seems to have become a sidebar to crisis management and debating divisive issues. Choosing to lead with *Vision: Healing and Hope* will make some feel as if we are turning our backs on the perceived concerns of our constituency. But we think a renewed focus on vision will, in fact, be unifying, life-giving, and transforming.

Leadership needs to be allowed to move forward into living *Vision: Healing and Hope* and creating a culture where seeking God’s call through the power of the Holy Spirit will fill the places in our gatherings where resolutions were deemed necessary.

We recognize we are calling for a change in our organizational culture, one of the hardest change strategies to manage. But with the future of our church at stake, it is a challenge worthy of our best efforts. To realign ourselves towards a unified vision of “healing and hope,” we propose that leaders begin by reframing our negative tendencies by drawing on the best habits we’ve received from our Anabaptist tradition.

- 1. From Spiritual Negligence to Spiritual Transformation.** Rather than giving our primary attention to the problems that need to be solved, we propose that the majority of our time together be spent in worship, Bible teaching, inspired preaching, testimony, and

prayerful discernment rather than debating ethical issues. The ethical debates brought about by resolutions have come to overshadow and distract us from everything else we intend to accomplish when we are together. When we give our first energies in delegate sessions to parliamentary decision making, rather than spiritual communion, we elevate one spiritual gift (prophets), to the minimization of the rest (apostles, shepherds, evangelists, and teachers). When this happens we are unable to grow up in every way into Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-16).

If we center ourselves around worship, biblical teaching, inspired preaching, testimony, and prayerful discernment, we believe we will begin again to embody the call God has placed on our lives to grow as communities of grace, joy, and peace. Do we trust God and the Holy Spirit enough to believe that by cultivating our spiritual life together God will empower us to live out our ethical call as well? Yes!

The earliest Anabaptists emphasized the authority of scripture. The scriptures were not intended to teach us only how to think about God, but how to live our daily lives. How do we live as citizens of God's Kingdom on this earth? The beauty of the scriptures is that they are the stories of God's people wrestling with the same question. Sometimes they got it right, sometimes they got it wrong. Even when they got it wrong they continued to trust that yielding to the presence and power of the Spirit, they would be the people of God. They continued to move forward, engaging different societies and cultures, and learning how to be faithful in various contexts. We continue that same work today - stumbling forward as cultures change, sometimes getting it right, sometimes getting it wrong, always loved, always trusting that the Spirit will guide us into all truth. (John 16:13).

The early Anabaptists so trusted in the Spirit of the risen Christ that they were willing to lay down their lives for their beliefs knowing that they would not live to see the outcome. They did so trusting God and the power of God's Spirit to fulfill God's purposes in God's time.

Focusing on our vision statement, we will hear stories of how God's healing and hope flows through us *to* the world. As a gathered body and in our media resources, we need to increase our volume of testimonies that bear witness to where our vision is being realized today. We need to hear congregational stories of going into their neighborhoods, of mission and service workers bearing witness in new cultures, and of church planters redeeming the cultural practices of the population they are reaching. These stories will show how God's healing and hope flow through us into the people and neighborhoods that we are called to serve.

- 2. Minimize Tribalism and Resource for Disciple-making.** Our blindness to tribalism has changed our understanding of mission. Because we have celebrated one set of cultural assumptions about what it means to be Mennonite, we have lost our identity as disciples who are sent into the world. Instead we invite others to participate in our Mennonite culture to experience the good news as we have lived it out in our segregated mono-subcultures. We do not know how to take the gospel into new cultures incarnationally nor how to recognize how witness to the Kingdom of God rises organically in the many cultures in our church. When we began our church we said, "Joining in God's activity in the world, we

develop and nurture missional Mennonite congregations of many cultures.” (Mission Statement, MC USA bylaws). What is the evidence that this has been the focus of our primary work?

As a denomination we need to proclaim that being a disciple grounded in the teachings, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is synonymous with being a member of Mennonite Church USA. In our gatherings, we need to prioritize the practices that enable us to see how the Spirit is animating the whole people of God in *this* mission. These are the very same practices that enable us to overcome spiritual negligence: worship, biblical teaching and discernment, inspired preaching, testimony, and prayerful discernment. Our understanding of God’s call and mission become more robust when our practice of these things is melded together across our many cultures. Doing this will enable us to build authentic Christian community across racial, ethnic, and class lines to the enhancement of our collective spiritual vitality.

A gift that our Anabaptist heritage offers us is that in coming to scripture *together* that we grow in our understanding of God’s call and mission found in Jesus. Different cultures will read the Bible differently. We can expect that our different ways of reading the Bible will lead to conflict. But one of gifts of the biblical account itself is the preservation of the paradox the early church needed to learn. When many cultures gather around the scriptures seeking to follow Jesus, the Spirit can be trusted to bring the church to new levels of Christian faithfulness as Christians yield their hearts and minds to the leading of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 6:1-7; Acts 8:26-31; Acts 10; Acts 15, etc.) Coming from many places and cultural experiences, it is inevitable that we will disagree in our interpretations (now we only see dimly). In our gatherings we need teaching, preaching, testimony and prayerful discernment from all experiences across our church. This will help us discover the paradox that even conflicting interpretation can be the occasion for new light to spring forth for all of us.

Conclusion

We have not given up on our church in spite of our impatience and disappointment with our current experience. We believe that God has more in store for our church than we currently know. If we confess our tendencies toward spiritual negligence and tribalism, we believe a new space will open for the power of the Spirit to transform us. If we reprioritize the central work that makes us available to God’s call, we will discover new freedom and buoyancy in our life together. Through a renewed engagement in worship, biblical teaching, inspired preaching, testimony and prayerful discernment, we will rediscover the grace, joy, and peace we first knew when we passed from death to life with Jesus. If we take up the task of following Jesus in this way, how can anything else happen but that God’s healing and hope would flow once again through us to the world?

--Peter Eberly, Sandra Montes Martinez,
Jessica Schrock-Ringenberg, and Jeremy Shue