

Faith Mennonite Church
World Fellowship Sunday
January 30, 2011
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Doing justice...around the world
Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

This month we have been examining issues of immigration in our worship and in our adult education hour. Today we culminate this series by observing World Fellowship Sunday in the Anabaptist Mennonite world. This celebration is organized by Mennonite World Conference (MWC), which is the worldwide communion of Anabaptist-related churches linked to one another for fellowship, worship, service, and witness. MWC exists to be a global community of faith in the Anabaptist tradition, to facilitate relationships between Anabaptist-related churches worldwide, and to relate to other Christian world communions and organizations. In the past 10-15 years, Mennonite World Conference has undertaken official dialogues at the international level with the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformed Church and the Lutheran World Federation.

Although the Anabaptist movement, and the Mennonite churches that grew out of that, began in Europe in the 16th Century, European Mennonites are now a minority in the worldwide body of Anabaptists. Migration has been a central feature shaping the growth and development of Mennonite churches since their earliest days. In the political turmoil of 16th century Reformation Europe, early Anabaptist leaders were often on the move, exiled from one locale and fleeing to another. Persecution and discrimination continued in Europe into the 17th century and in 1683 the first group of Mennonites (and Quakers) accepted an invitation from William Penn to migrate to Pennsylvania, in the American colonies. In the 18th Century, Mennonite migration from Europe moved in the opposite direction, when Mennonites in Prussia answered an invitation from Catherine the Great of Russia, in 1786, to settle and farm in the Ukraine.

Although the Moravian Church, from which Hermann Weinlick hales, began sending missionaries to various parts of the world in 1732, Mennonites in North America and Europe did not begin extending themselves to other parts of the world with missionary purposes until the late 19th and early 20th century. One of the earliest Mennonite missions was in India. Today India ranks 4th among countries in the number of Mennonites, after the US, Congo, and Ethiopia. By continent, Africa now holds the greatest number of Mennonites, followed by North America, Asia, Latin America, and Europe.

The greatest movement of Mennonites around the world, however, has not been through intentional missionary endeavors but through migration caused by political upheaval. Mennonites who settled in the Ukraine in the 18th century, relocated to North America following the Russian Revolution in the early 20th century and then to South America, following World War 2. Today the Mennonite Church in many parts of the world is a multinational and cultural church because of migration. The reception of migrants has brought renewal to the church, and a reconnection with what it means to be Anabaptist Christians—with what it means to “do justice and love mercy” (Micah 6), and to understand the words of Jesus: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

I'd like to share two stories that give us a glimpse of this global immigrant church. The Central Plains Mennonite Conference, which we are part of, has a partnership with the

Mennonite Church in Ecuador. This partnership grew out of missionary activity begun by the Colombian Mennonite Church. They sent a couple, Cesar Moya and Patricia Ureña, to help with leadership training at the invitation of the Federation of Evangelical Indigenous Churches. That federation has 3,500 congregations but only 500 pastors. Cesar and Patricia did not intend to begin a Mennonite Church, but rather assist the federation. But as participants in a Bible study that they led in Quito learned more about Anabaptist Mennonite theology, they asked if they could become a Mennonite congregation. Although a relatively small congregation of around 40 members and 80 persons who attend worship, they have taken on two ambitious ministries—both in response to needs around them.

One of these ministries is Saturday Peace Workshops for children that they offer once a month in a poor neighborhood of Quito where domestic violence and gang violence are prevalent. Patricia designs the workshops that teach children how to respond to and not tolerate violence and how to interact with their friends, parents, and teachers respectfully. About 8-10% of the 2000 children in this neighborhood have attended the workshops, which have gained broad support from parents and the neighborhood association.

The second ministry of this church is a refugee program. Ecuador is home to many refugees who have fled the political turmoil in Colombia. Colombian refugees in Ecuador encounter similar circumstances as undocumented immigrants here in the U.S. They face discrimination and are not able to find jobs. Most of the evangelical (protestant) churches don't want to involve themselves in helping refugees. The Quito Mennonite Church, which is about one third Colombian, helps refugees in various ways, such as finding housing and employment, teaching their children and counseling children who have been traumatized. The refugee needs are overwhelming for such a small church, and the work is sometimes dangerous, because some refugees have participated in the violence or are involved in drugs. Mennonite Central Committee is helping to fund a partnership between the Quito church and the Anglican Church in Ecuador to aid refugees.¹

In Philadelphia, not far from the site of Germantown Mennonite Church, the oldest Mennonite Church in North America, two of the newest Mennonite churches are comprised of immigrants. One church is named the Philadelphia Praise Center. The other is the Nations Worship Center. Most of the members of these two churches are Indonesian immigrants. Many came to the US from Indonesia, seeking asylum and new homes after religiously motivated riots in 2000.

According to an article in *The Mennonite*,² “leaders of these congregations deal with both the spiritual and practical implications of being new immigrant congregations.” Beny Krisbianto, leader of Nations Worship Center says: “We always deal with immigration issues. After 9/11 it has become very hard to apply for citizenship.” Each day members of both of these congregations face the challenges of finding work, accessing health care, negotiating the complex immigration process and learning English. Pastor Krisbianto says that although “our citizenship is in heaven, we can't ignore hurting people and those who face injustice in their lives.”

¹ http://centralplains.mennonite.net/Ministries/Outreach___Service/Ecuador_Partnership January 29, 2010

² Ken Beidler, “Immigrant Churches call Mennonite Church USA beyond its comfort zone,” *The Mennonite*, Feb 3, 2009. <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/Home/News/tabid/65/EntryID/51/Default.aspx>. The following account quotes extensively from this article.

Aldo Siahaan, the pastor of Philadelphia Praise Center, was not a member of the Mennonite church before he came to the United States. Through his friendship with an Indonesian Mennonite pastor from Central Java, and from reading Mennonite theological materials, he was attracted to the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. He was impressed by the message of peace because he believes that “the core message of the Gospel is not only in the pulpit but in our daily lives; the love of Jesus is not only in talk, but in the act.”

These churches, which only recently joined Franconia Conference, in 2006 and 2007, are known within the conference as being “entrepreneurial. They don’t disconnect the work of evangelism from peace and justice,” according to Steven Kniss, a conference official. They have also taken up the challenge of being a multicultural church. The PPC worships in three languages—Indonesian, English and Spanish—in a single service, which is no easy thing.

And they’ve done more than that. In 2007 the PPC made the decision to open their building and provide food to Muslim neighbors during Ramadan, the Muslim time of fasting and prayer. This began when the pastor became aware of the need in the Muslim community for space to gather and pray during Ramadan. This act of hospitality was also an act of peacemaking. “Because of the persecution by Muslims that the Christians had experienced in Indonesia, this was an opportunity to show love of God, to show the mercy,” said Pastor Siahann.

The PPC faced opposition for offering this hospitality to Muslims. Pastors of other neighborhood churches called to say “You are not supposed to open the church to the Muslim. The presence of the Lord will leave your congregation.” But members of the PPC say that the relationship with Muslim neighbors has helped them find their Mennonite identity. “Anabaptist perspectives make sense to Indonesian Christians because they were marginalized in their home country and they continue to live on the margins here in the U.S.,” according to Kniss.

The immigrant churches of Philadelphia have not only reached out to their Muslim neighbors, they’ve also forged relationships with the more established, European-Mennonite congregations in the conference. The immigrant churches have called on these churches to join them in political advocacy around immigration. They’ve also challenged long-established congregations to move out from their comfort zone. Pastor Siahaan notes that “This country is luring people with so many things. I know Mennonites have done many good things, but with all our resources we can do more. [People outside the church] want to see us; they want to see Jesus through us. Let’s make Jesus visible through our life.”

These are just two examples of many that exist in the worldwide Mennonite fellowship. Let us give thanks. Let us pray for our brothers and sisters around the world as we become ever more linked through migration.