

EVERY TRIBE AND TONGUE

MATTHEW 28:16-20; REVELATION 7:9-12
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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AUGUST 9, 2015/11TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

My sermon this morning will be part “delegate report,” part “reflection,” part “challenge,” and part “encouragement.”

At one point on the flight out to Pennsylvania, Naomi asked me, “So what is the point of these conferences? What do we do?”

It’s actually a good question. Maybe it’s a question that’s occurred to you, too.

MWC Assemblies are not like other provincial or national Mennonite Church gatherings where there are budgets to discuss and decisions to make.

They are primarily about celebration, worship, and the building of global community among this wonderfully diverse family of faith, all of whom trace their origins to the Radical Reformation of the 16th century.

But even though I knew this, I still wasn’t quite sure what to expect.

I had never attended one of these events before, not least because they are relatively rare. MWC happens only once every six years—the previous one was in Asuncion, Paraguay in 2009; the next one, in 2021, will be in Indonesia.

The first thing that I noticed at MWC is, obviously, the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual makeup of those present. This was not unexpected, of course—it is Mennonite *World* Conference!—but to see it, to hear it, to be part of it was wonderful.

According to the MWC website, the delegates present at MWC represented “102 Mennonite and Brethren in Christ national churches from 56 countries, with around 1.4 million baptized believers in close to 10,000 congregations.”

The Mennonite world is, perhaps, a bit more diverse and global than you might have thought!

Even more interestingly, about 81% of baptized believers in MWC member churches are African, Asian or Latin American, and 19% are located in Europe and North America.

So, if you are a Mennonite of Swiss, German, or Russian ethnic background, you are an ethnic minority in the global Anabaptist family!

To quote an American friend of mine who I met for the first time in Pennsylvania,

[E]ven though the conversations are still being led by the country club of old white guys with Swiss German roots and that is where our roots first lay; it is not where they stayed.¹

This changing global reality was reflected in the main sessions that we attended twice each day, in the themes of each day, as well as in the content of the workshops that we could attend each afternoon.

Each day of the week was devoted to a different part of the world. So, Thursday, for example, was Africa day. The music was performed by Africans, we sang songs in African languages, the sermon was delivered by an African. And other days would be devoted to Latin America, Asia, Europe, etc.

But the big picture was that the entire week was all about coming together as a global family of faith to get to know one another, to encourage and strengthen one another, to learn from one another.

And to eat together. Of course. 😊

I need to say that it was a gift to be able to attend MWC with my family.

¹ <http://www.jeffmclain.com/2015/07/28/mennonite-world-conference-who-we-are-and-what-i-took-away/>

So often, I travel to conferences and events by myself and then try to convey to them what it was like, how it affected me, etc.

It was really great to watch my kids encounter other kids their own age from other countries of the world, to recognize that they are part of a big and beautiful church that is deep and wide and loud and proud and multi-ethnic and boldly courageous.

I am very grateful to you, as a church, for making this possible. It was wonderful to share this experience with my family.

I want to focus my reflections this morning in two directions, based on the two readings that we just heard.

First, **Matthew 28:16-20**.

The gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus giving his first disciples a job.

Go! Baptize! Make disciples!

And this is what the church has done. Throughout the past two millennia or so since Jesus uttered these words, Christians have gone, they have baptized, and they have made disciples in all nations.

Increasingly, though, in our postmodern Western context, we are a bit squeamish about evangelism. We don't want to tell people what they should believe or do or think. It's arrogant, we think, to assume that we have the truth and others don't.

We don't want to be seen as "intolerant" or "judgmental." There are few higher sins that we could imagine committing in our cultural context.

This describes the broader Western Christian world. It also describes the Mennonite world.

Hippolyto Tshimanga is Director of Africa, Europe & Latin America Ministry for Mennonite Church Canada. During his sermon at MWC on Saturday morning, he put it this way:

Mennonites love service, flirt with peace, and are allergic to evangelism.

I think the shoe very often fits.

Interestingly, though, our Mennonite brothers and sisters in the global south do not share this view.

Throughout the week, we heard strong calls from African voices, from Asian voices, from South American to not give up confidently proclaiming the name of Jesus as the one in whom salvation and forgiveness, healing and hope is to be found.

Our brothers and sisters from the global south consistently reminded us that without mission the church is nothing.

If we, as the church, are not in the business of going out and making disciples, then we have no reason to exist.

This does not mean a return to bad forms of evangelism.

It is undoubtedly true that the history of the church is full of examples of people who sought to make disciples in poor ways, in inadequate and shortsighted ways, even in *colonial* ways.

White, European Christians have far too frequently given the impression that following Jesus means becoming like white, European Christians.

But at its best, the church has communicated in word and deed, in evangelism and in service, in verbal proclamation and in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, the gospel of Jesus Christ which is good news for all people.

We must never tire of this.

This call resounded from the lectern nearly every day in different ways at MWC 2015 in Harrisburg, most frequently, again, from the 81% of our non-white, European Anabaptist family.

We have a message and a life that is worth sharing with a world that is hurting and broken and chasing after idols.

We have the gospel of peace given to us by the Lord of Life. We are heralds of news that is genuinely good!

Most of us will not travel to the four corners of the earth to make disciples. But each one of us has neighbours. Each one of us has friends and relatives and co-workers who have yet to commit to follow Jesus.

We must never be ashamed to give a reason for the hope that we have, with gentleness and respect (as Kathrina mentioned last week).

We must never forget that the task of the church is to make disciples.

Our second passage comes from Revelation 7:9-12

At the end of Matthew, Jesus gives his disciples a call to action. In Revelation we are given a vision of the fruit of this action.

A great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...

It is a glorious image. Every tribe and tongue, people and language, standing before their Lord and Maker.

Events like MWC provide a foretaste of Revelation 7.

And the vision described by Revelation 7 has a profound connection to Matthew 28.

The reason that nearly eight thousand Anabaptist-Mennonite Christians from around the globe could gather as one family of faith, united in love and devotion to Christ, is because people who went before us were convinced that they needed to go and make disciples of all nations.

The fact that MWC 2015 had speakers from Zimbabwe and the DR Congo and the Philippines and Japan and Colombia and Mexico and Australia and Spain and France and Holland and USA and Canada.... is because Christian and *Mennonite* history has been full of people who *went*.

Our wonderfully diverse global Anabaptist community would be an impossibility if our forefathers and foremothers would have kept their faith a private thing and tried not to offend anyone with their views.

The vision at the end of Revelation ought to inspire and embolden us as a church—
because it's already happening!

It's so easy to be cynical about the church, or to get into the habit of constantly apologizing for its sins (real or imagined), or to constantly be lamenting the present declining state of the church in the West.

It's easy to allow our view of the church and of the kingdom of God to shrink to the size of our own experience. It's easy to think that our issues ought to be everyone else's issues, that our challenges are everyone else's challenges.

At least it is for me.

But the truth is that we, here at Lethbridge Mennonite Church, are a part of something that is a global phenomenon, a historical phenomenon, even a *cosmic* phenomenon.

What I was reminded of again and again at MWC is that **the God that we serve has given birth to a very beautiful church.**

And we are a part of this.

Yes, the church stumbles and falls all the time, yes there are theological controversies that damage our witness to a watching world, yes there is a long way to go to achieve the unity that we sing about in our songs and speak about from our pulpits.

Yes, yes, to all of this and more.

But there is a beauty in our global Anabaptist church that can be breathtaking. It was a beauty that often moved me to tears in Harrisburg.

To look around during worship and see black faces and brown faces and white faces and young faces and old faces, to see flags from Zimbabwe and Cuba and Colombia and

Taiwan and Honduras and Spain and Brazil and the Philippines and countless others, to hear the sound of thousands of voices raised in praise...

To share meals with people I couldn't communicate with but with whom I nonetheless feel a deep connection...

To attend workshops and hear the stories of faith and struggle and victory and suffering from people whose experience in life is significantly different from my own...

To see the exuberance and joy and celebration of sisters and brothers from around the world, whose faith is nourished in contexts *far* more challenging than ours...

To look around and to realize that even this international gathering represents but a tiny slice of the global body of Christ.

It was an amazing and profoundly moving experience.

How utterly remarkable that this Jesus movement that began with a handful of peasants following a dusty Jewish rabbi around the Palestinian countryside as he announced this strange and unexpected kingdom, as he died like a criminal and emerged out the other side of the grave has somehow become a staggeringly diverse community that spans the globe, **all proclaiming in their own way, that this Jesus has meant for them hope and healing, forgiveness and salvation, redemption, a pattern for living, and unutterable joy.**

Incredible.

And together we are journeying toward that future reality captured by John's vision on the Island of Patmos in the book of Revelation.

A great multitude from every nation, cleansed and forgiven, coming together before the Lamb in worship and gratitude and joy.

So the message I would bring to you from MWC is really quite a simple one.

Be joyful. You are part of something that is more beautiful and hopeful than you can imagine.

Be emboldened. You have good news that is worth sharing.

Take heart! Our God is very good and he has given birth to a beautiful church. Not a perfect church, but a beautiful church that is following in the footsteps of a beautiful Saviour.

And finally, **be encouraged.** For Jesus has promised that he is with us always, until the very end of the age.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

