

MENNONITE/LUTHERAN RECONCILIATION

'Rattling everyone's paradigms'

Professors switch theological sides in Mennonite/Lutheran conversations

BY DICK BENNER

Editor/Publisher
WATERLOO, ONT.

Walking in each other's theological shoes for a day, professors from their respective seminaries in Waterloo, Ont.—Conrad Grebel University College and Waterloo Lutheran Seminary—engaged in a bit of humour by having a Mennonite talk about “grace” and a Lutheran expound on “discipleship.”

“We wanted to rattle everyone's paradigms,” said Robert A. Kelly, Lutheran professor of systematic theology, in a day of “conversations” between Lutherans and Mennonites on Nov. 26 at Wilfrid Laurier University, as part of the ongoing reconciliation and healing process between the denominations. Presentations by an equal number of professors from the two institutions followed an evening of healing ceremonies, testimonies, confessions, shared hymns and choral selections.

Kelly, who grew up and was educated in “liberal” California, admitted first off that “this Lutheran has been tainted by Anabaptist ideas about public discipleship by the likes of John Howard Yoder, Clarence Jordan, Ron Sider and Jim Wallis, not to mention Dietrich Bonhoeffer.”

He confessed that out of the Reformation and Martin Luther's influence Lutherans “became so worried about their own salvation that they thought about little else. They never worried about the good of their neighbour or the welfare of their communities.”

Over time, however, he said they got over that preoccupation. Today, that mantra has been transformed into something that says “by grace, the God who has saved us in Christ has called us to be responsible for the welfare of our community and for the future health of creation.” The caveat, though, is that, even with the best of intentions, “we did horrendous damage to the very people we were trying to help,” citing the scandal of Canada's residential schools

as the classic case of trying, “in their own view,” to be redemptive with aboriginal

children while “destroying a culture.”

In like manner, Tom Yoder Neufeld,

PHOTO BY RICHARD ALBRECHT



David Martin, left, executive minister of Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, receives the sign of the cross on his open hand from Michael Pryse, bishop of the Eastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, at a service of repentance and healing between Lutherans and Mennonites at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary on Nov. 25. After confessing to mutual wrongdoing over the past five centuries, all left with a blessing: “The God of healing and reconciliation grant you to live in peace with one another in accordance with Jesus Christ. The God of abundance meet your hunger and thirst for righteousness so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. The God of grace bless you now and forever. Amen.”

MENNONITE/LUTHERAN RECONCILIATION

professor of religious studies at Conrad Grebel, quipped that it was a “sign of God’s grace that, unlike in the 16th century, today we do not have a disputation, but a dialogue between sisters and brothers who know themselves to be members of the same body,” confessing that there is much for “us Mennonites to grapple with when it comes to grace.”

Taking their cues on grace from the Sermon on the Mount, rather than from the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians (God loving us even in our sinfulness), Mennonites, Yoder Neufeld said, always knew “Paul was Lutheran!” Seriously, though, the professor confessed, “As much as there is sometimes a sense that ‘grace’ is someone else’s agenda, there are some among us who feel strongly both the lack of full appreciation in our tradition about grace and its centrality in the Christian life.”

Citing several Anabaptist thinkers, such as Stephen Dintaman who decried Harold Bender’s “Anabaptist Vision” as so confined to ethics as to miss the “brokenness and sinfulness many of us Mennonites struggle with in our broken lives,” Yoder Neufeld claimed a certain “fatigue” has evolved in “trying too hard.” He noted the work of a colleague, Arnold Snyder, who, for decades from his work in Nicaragua and his study of 16th century Anabaptism, has insisted that to love one’s enemies requires the gracious work of the Holy Spirit.

And in highlighting the ongoing debate about grace in Mennonite circles, he cited the polarities of the late J. Lawrence Burkholder, who argued in his dissertation for a kind of “social responsibility” that is not squeamish about getting one’s hands dirty in engaging justice in the world, and the late John Howard Yoder, who, according to Yoder Neufeld, worried that an over-emphasis on grace “cuts the prophetic nerve of the church’s witness when it becomes the back door to not following Jesus.”

Jeremy Bergen, professor of religious studies and theology at Conrad Grebel, cautioned against giving Anabaptist martyrs celebrity status in the reconciliation process, saying that if these martyrs “truly point to Christ with their entire lives and with their deaths, then they are witnesses

for the entire church, not just Mennonites.” He asked Mennonites to “cease to regard them as martyrs until we discover with our Lutheran partners whether and in what way they might be witnesses for the whole church.”

Offering the human touch to an otherwise heavily theological conversation, Kristine Lund, director of pastoral care and counselling at the Lutheran seminary, said that the road to forgiveness is a process, taking different forms with different

individuals or institutions. While it has therapeutic value, forgiveness also carries implicit vulnerability, leading to a “terrifying, but unbelievably exciting” experience.

Some limitations are that forgiveness doesn’t always require repentance and it doesn’t always result in reconciliation, she said. But the popular notion that says “forgive and forget” is to throw away a valuable experience, she suggested, adding that to genuinely forgive is a way to freedom. ☸

Healing memories, reconciling in Christ

BY DEBORAH FROESE

Mennonite Church Canada

Historical records are shaped by the perspectives of those who write them, but perspectives that clash can cause centuries of pain.

On July 22, an apology from Lutherans for their historical persecution of Mennonites initiated a

new relationship between these parts of the church and opened a door to revisiting their shared but distinctive histories.

“We have to change the way we teach our history,” says Janet Plenert, who, as executive secretary of Mennonite Church Canada Witness and vice-president of Mennonite World Conference (MWC), has been actively involved in the reconciliation process.

To provide a solid foundation for nurturing this new relationship, reconciled through a common faith and commitment to Christ, MC Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada jointly prepared a new study guide, “Healing Memories, Reconciling in Christ,” for distribution to their respective congregations.

The guide reflects the historical relationship between Lutherans and Mennonites in a portrayal accepted by both churches. It illustrates how differences between them arose, helping to bridge the gap between



misunderstandings.

The guide was created by Allen Jorgenson, Lutheran pastor and seminary professor, and Margaret Loewen Reimer, Mennonite editor and writer. It is based on a report by the Lutheran-Mennonite International

Study Commission, a three-year dialogue begun by MWC and the Lutheran World Federation.

Lutherans and Mennonites are encouraged to work through the study guide together wherever possible. Four one-hour sessions include material from the study commission report, questions, relevant Bible studies and prayers. Links to video clips are included.

In addition to print copies of the study guide, each MC Canada congregation will receive a copy of the Lutheran World Federation’s magazine, *Lutheran World Information*, that focuses entirely on the apology and reconciliation.

“We’re providing a lot of resources, but we need people to implement them,” Plenert says, encouraging congregations and area churches to implement this study however they feel is most effective within their own communities. ☸

Heartfelt apology

Faith Mennonite welcomes Lutherans on Reformation Sunday

BY DAVE ROGALSKY
Eastern Canada Correspondent

On Reformation Sunday, Oct. 31, Faith Mennonite Church in Leamington, Ont., was visited by neighbours and friends from the local St. Paul's Lutheran Church.

Reformation Sunday marks the anniversary in 1517 when Martin Luther began public theological dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church that is considered the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

The Reformation Sunday event was planned this spring after word of the Lutheran World Federation's call for Lutherans to repent of their persecution of Anabaptists over the centuries was announced.

As Rev. Thomas Mertz, co-pastor of St. Paul's, spoke, many in the Faith congregation were moved to tears. While it had been decided that there would not be an apology during the sermon, Mertz, moved by the Spirit, offered a heartfelt apology on behalf of the Lutherans. He spoke of the beginnings of the Reformation, the need for dialogue forgotten, and the hurt that resulted. Mertz then presented a copy of the *Evangelical Lutheran Book of Worship* to Faith's church council chair Jake Fehr, and led in a prayer for the two congregations and their respective denominations.

In response, Ruth Boehm, Faith's pastor, presented a breadbasket cloth to Mertz for his congregation. She had cross-stitched it for an Anabaptist history project at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. The design was from a pattern book dated 1545 that was printed in Augsburg, Germany. Fehr also presented Yutta Wilson, a member of St. Paul's Lutheran Church Council, a peace candle on behalf



Ruth Boehm, right, pastor of Faith Mennonite Church, Leamington, Ont., presents Rev. Thomas Mertz, co-pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church, with a breadbasket cloth she stitched from a 1545 German pattern book on Reformation Sunday, Oct. 31.

of Faith Mennonite.

After the service, a junior youth member asked if "that stuff between the Lutherans and the Anabaptists really happened." Another congregant said that he didn't see

a need for an apology at all, while another was so moved that he volunteered to sing at the Lutheran church when the breadbasket cloth was to be used. ☼

Discover South America!

Brazil & Paraguay Tour – April 2011

Rio, Curitiba, Witmarsum, Iguazu Falls, Asuncion, Mennonite Colonies and more.

Peru & Paraguay Tour – Sept./Oct. 2011

Lima, Cuzco, Machu Picchu, Asuncion, Mennonite Colonies, Iguazu Falls

*Call for
special discount!*

Contact Rudolf Duerksen at (204) 415-6836

southway@shaw.ca

www.southwaytours.com