

Praying that We May be One

John 17:20-23

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Mennonite World Communion Sunday

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

Today we are observing Mennonite World Conference Sunday. The worldwide movement of Mennonites is extremely diverse, with 243 national groups of churches around the globe. This diversity of Mennonites also holds true in Canada and the U.S. where there are a total of 42 distinct Mennonite groups.¹

The Mennonite Church USA to which we belong is just one of those 42 North American Mennonite groups. Others include various Amish and Old Colony groups, various Brethren in Christ and Mennonite Brethren groups, Mennonite Church Canada, and others. Although we are all descendants of Anabaptism, we are diverse in theology, ecclesiology, ethnicity, politics, and economics.

Even our own Mennonite Church USA has significant diversity. New evidence of our diversity appeared on January 5, when our denominational offices released the results of a new survey. One purpose of this survey was to find out what credentialed leaders think about LGBTQ individuals in the life of the church. This survey was emailed to pastors, conference ministers, chaplains, pastoral counselors, credentialed college and seminary teachers, and so on—to everyone in

¹ *World Directory 2012*, https://www.mwc-cmm.org/sites/default/files/website_files/mwc_world_directory_w_links_minus_cover.pdf, accessed December 18, 2014.

the denomination who is a licensed or ordained minister. It also included retired ministers.

This survey provides ample evidence of our diverse views on LGBTQ issues. The final report of the survey is 21 pages long, so I can't possibly summarize all of it here. If you want to read the whole thing you can go the website of Mennonite Church USA. But I do want to give you a flavor of some of the diverse views reflected in this report.

Take the question of whether MC USA should allow LGBTQ individuals to serve in leadership roles in the church.

- 20% of ministers believe that LGBTQ individuals should have opportunities to serve in leadership roles without any conditions.
- 26% of ministers believe that those in monogamous relationships, or who are celibate, may serve in leadership roles.
- 36% of ministers believe that only celibate LGBTQ individuals may be leaders.
- 19% of all ministers believe that LGBTQ individuals should not lead.²

This means that 82% of ministers will accept LGBTQ individuals in congregational leadership roles, although they disagree under what conditions LGBTQ individuals can be leaders.

Conrad Kanagy, the author of the report on this new survey, says that “In terms of views on both LGBTQ membership and leadership, Mennonite Church

² Conrad L. Kanagy, “2014 Survey of Credentialed Leaders in Mennonite Church USA: Executive Summary,” http://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/MCUSA_2014Survey_ExecSummary_Dec17.pdf, accessed December 18, 2014. For this sermon I've rounded off the percentages in the report to the nearest whole number. Because of rounding, not all percentages add up to 100.

USA leaders have shifted dramatically.”³ Kanagy frankly says that a kind of “dismantling” is currently happening in our denomination.⁴

If you read news from the wider church and talk with Mennonites in other places, then you know about this dismantling. Some congregations have left their conference, while other congregations are talking about leaving their conference. Some are switching membership to another conference while others are leaving the denomination entirely. Many conferences, including our Indiana-Michigan Conference, are in some degree of unrest over LGBTQ and related issues.

In this context of diversity and dismantling, the prayer of Jesus in John 17:20-23 takes on fresh relevance. In this prayer Jesus asks that the church will be one as Jesus and the Father are one. Why is oneness important? Because in the gospel of John, oneness is the way people outside the church come to know Jesus. When the church is one with itself, and one with God, it conveys a winsome witness. When people behold the oneness of the church, they are more inclined to develop a relationship with Jesus.

In our present situation in MC USA where disagreement over LGBTQ issues is so strong, I frankly do not know what it means to be one. Does this mean unity around a confession of faith? Could it mean unity in supporting Mennonite mission and educational organizations? Could it mean unity of devotion to Christ? In what ways can we fruitfully express oneness with each other and with God?

However we answer these questions, I do believe that the Holy Spirit has ways of creating oneness among us that we can hardly dare to imagine. It may not be the oneness we used to have. It may not be the oneness we thought we needed.

³ Conrad L. Kanagy, “2014 Survey of Credentialed Leaders in Mennonite Church USA: Final Report,” http://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/MCUSA_2014Survey_FinalReport_Dec17.pdf, accessed December 18, 2014, lines 293-294.

⁴ Kanagy, “Final Report,” lines 799-819.

It may not be the oneness we dreamed of. Yet in the mercy of God it could turn out to be a kind of delicious oneness that surpasses any of those.

I am not anxious about the future of the Mennonite Church USA. We have wise, intelligent, and deeply spiritual people working at all levels of our denomination. They are doing the best they can, and with God's help we will get through this somehow.

I have another reason for not being anxious. Our congregation, our conference, and our denomination do not really belong to us. Instead, they belong to God's—Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. God is the one who created us and who cares for us. The church is God's work, not ours. If God wants the church to survive, then somehow God will make it survive. Ultimately this enterprise is God's, not ours. So I'm not anxious. I'm confident about the future because I'm confident in God.

Meanwhile, we can join Jesus in praying for a unity that transcends our humanity. As we pray, let us practice the art of being patient and merciful with each other, even when we don't agree.