



**Mennonite
Church**
Canada

Resource Centre

From our Churches

Author: Alissa Bender

*Church: Calgary-area MC Canada
churches*

*Date: International Day for the Elimination of
Racial Discrimination,
March 21, 2010*

This resource is part of a larger **From Our Churches** archives available as an inspirational resource to teachers, ministers and others of Mennonite Church Canada. Posted by permission of the author. Permission to reproduce and distribute is granted.

PRESS ON

A Christian response to hate
A worship resource for March 21, 2010

Inspiration for this worship resource:

The city of Calgary has the distressing distinction of having the highest rate of hate-motivated crime in Canada, as much as three times higher than the national average. After yet another news story on this theme, participants of the Calgary Mennonite Ministerial felt encouraged to share alternative messages within our congregations and in our broader communities.

Our hope for this resource is for Mennonite churches in Calgary to join their voices and hearts in worshipping God who brings forth great diversity in the beauty of creation and calls us to celebrate it. As we recall that all of God's created children are loved equally, no matter the differences between us, we hope to be inspired to be lights in our communities, not allowing hatred based on race, religion, or culture to take root.

The date:

On March 21, 1960, police in Sharpsville, South Africa, opened fire on a peaceful group of young students demonstrating against the apartheid laws, killing 69 people. In 1966, the General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed that date to be the "International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination". In Canada, the Day has been recognized annually since 1989. It is fitting that we recognize this day in the liturgical season of Lent, as we confess who God is as the Creator who loves us, and confess also how we have not always responded to that love as God would desire.

Songs are chosen from *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (HWB), *Sing the Journey* (STJ) and *Sing the Story* (STS) unless otherwise indicated (available at www.mpn.net). Lots of other fitting music can be easily found, so search your own congregation's collection and add other options.

At a central spot in your worship space, have a small tree or vase of branches. Distribute a piece of ribbon to each person as they enter worship. During the time of confession and commitment, worshippers will leave these ribbons behind by tying them on the branches, and pick up a ribbon that they can wear, pinned to a card that declares words of commitment as they go forth from this day.

GATHERING

Gathering Words

A word of explanation may be in order to gather people's reflections around the theme of today's worship, perhaps drawing on the "Inspiration for this worship resource" above. Fitting with the Lenten materials from Leader magazine, the movement will be from holding on to a celebration of God's creative gifts in a diverse creation and letting go of the attitudes that build or allow walls of racism and hatred.

Paul said "I press on toward the goal" as God called him in Jesus. We, too, press on toward the goal of a world where God's love rules. "Pressing on" means that we're always in motion. It indicates persistence, and it might also indicate putting pressure on the people and situations that can effect transformation toward more inclusive communities.

Call to Worship (based on Psalm 126 & Isaiah 43:16-21):

- Reader 1: When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.
- Reader 2: When God repaired our broken communities, we could hardly believe it was true.
- Reader 1: We laughed aloud!
- Reader 2: We shouted for joy!
- Reader 1: Then it was said among the nations: "The Lord has done great things for them"
- Reader 2: Then we said: "The Lord has done great things for *all* of us!" And we celebrated.
- Reader 1: God says: "I am about to do a new thing".
- Reader 2: God is always ready to do a new thing.
- Reader 1: Now it springs forth – can we perceive it?
- Reader 2: Now it's on the doorstep – do we notice it?
- Readers 1&2: Let's declare God's praise!

Opening Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit.

Into what is stale and in need of new life, come.

Into what is new, and in need of discernment, come.

Into our old fears and recent anxieties, come.

Into our entrenched prejudices and new understandings, come.

Bring the breath of new life.

Make of us your new creation.

In Christ's name,

Amen.

HOLDING ON

Songs of praise

Suggestions:

- HWB 6 Here in this place
- HWB 15 O Prince of Peace
- HWB 154 This is my Father's World
- HWB 156 All things bright and beautiful
- STJ 3 Jesus calls us here to meet him

Story of celebration

Invite someone in your congregation to share a story of God's presence in a cross-cultural experience. Seek out a story that involves the breaking down of walls of racism, and a joyful experience of grace. You may also consider the theme of "pressing on", persistence that brings about joyful surprises.

Songs of praise

Suggestions:

- HWB 78 Father God, you are holy
- HWB 306 In Christ there is no East or West
- HWB 305 Where charity and love prevail
- HWB 325 Creating God, your fingers trace
- STJ 64 Somos el cuerpo de Cristo (We are the body of Christ)

Offering

(Everyone should have been given a ribbon on the way in. Ask the ushers to carry a few extras around, in case anyone needs one. Consider asking an individual or small group to sing one of the song suggestions that doesn't fit in elsewhere, or one that is less well-known)

Offering Prayer - HWB 750

HEARING GOD'S WORD

Scripture: Philippians 3:4b-14

(Consider asking someone to memorize this Scripture to present it word for word – from your usual translation or Eugene Peterson's paraphrase The Message – along with a few dramatic actions. For example, "Paul" could hold up a piece of paper as a sort of proof of pedigree for each of the characteristics he lists, and then tear them to pieces and dump them in a garbage can at the appropriate time. Instead of paper, he could be tossing plastic cards, like membership or credit cards, onto a table as he names his credentials.)

John 12:1-8

Children's Time

Story suggestion – *A Family of Ice Cream* by Melanie DeSouza-Cook. This story celebrates the God-created differences between us. The book is available by emailing Derek.Cook@mail.mcgill.ca.

Story suggestion – “Keeping her Promises” from *Plant a Seed of Peace* by Rebecca Seiling (available to borrow or buy at www.mennonitechurch.ca/resourcecentre). In this story, Marcy is told that she can't trust the people she is going to visit, just because they are from a different part of the world. But the people give her generous gifts as a thank you for coming to help them. People are people no matter where they're from, what they look like, and what they sound like. Maybe sometimes we need to be brave to find that out, but we'll be glad, and God is happy when we make new friends!

If you sing with your children, teach them “I will bless you” from Bryan Moyer Suderman's recording *A New Heart*. For details on obtaining permission to use this song, see <http://www.smalltallmusic.com/permissions.html>. This song reminds us that God promises to bless us, but it's not because God loves some people more than others. God wants blessings to be spread around to everyone, and asks us to help by loving, befriending, and taking care of other people.

If your children leave the sanctuary during the second half of the service and won't be part of the time of confession and commitment, give them the “Press On” buttons, and explain that pressing on means we keep on trying to make a world where everybody can know that God loves them.

Sermon Seed

We can be confused by Jesus' words in this story from John's gospel, thinking that it's strange for him to say “you always have the poor with you”, as if to add “so you may as well spend your money on what seems good at the time.” But as the Scripture arrangement illustrates for us, Jesus was speaking in shorthand to his listeners, reminding them of God's instructions for life in the book of Deuteronomy. Despite God's commands for the Israelites to care for each other, God's words through Moses recognize that there will in fact always be need on the earth. This is followed, though, by the command to “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land”. The constant existence of need doesn't give us reason to give up trying to meet it. This is true in the context of any need, including those who are oppressed by racism and others forms of hatred. Although Deut. 15:11 uses a word for “neighbour” that usually implies family, many parts of the Old Testament remind the Israelites to care for the resident alien in the land, for they, too, were aliens in Egypt (see Exodus 22:21, Exodus 23:9, Leviticus 19:33-34). The word “alien” may sound strange to our ears today, but at a basic level, it refers to someone who is not viewed as part of the community. Someone with whom we can't trace a common line of lineage. Someone who is different from us.

Jesus' words at Bethany were addressed to people who would understand the “in” language. Paul's words in Philippians 3:4b-14 list credentials that could also communicate a certain message to his hearers. But although Paul could claim the value of his family, race, and heritage before these eager new Christians, he counts all of these society-approved status symbols as “rubbish”. What he holds above everything else is knowing Jesus as Christ and Lord. He now strives for the righteousness from God based on faith in Christ, and not a righteousness of his own that comes from the law (vs 9).

Paul's words may seem to come from a different context than our own, but on this day we confess that violence and oppression still emerge in our communities because of the valuing of one race or culture over another. With Paul, we desire to regard as loss the gains that society grants us in this respect, straining forward to what lies ahead, the "new thing" that Isaiah promises in 43:19.

Song of response

Suggestions:

HWB 7 Here, O Lord, your servants gather
HWB 145 There's a wideness in God's mercy
HWB 322 For we are strangers no more
HWB 367 For the healing of the nations
STS 114 God has chosen me
STS 117 How can I say

LETTING GO

Story of lamentation

If you know of someone in your congregation who has been a victim of racism and hatred, ask them if they would feel comfortable sharing it in worship, as a way to name and lament the reality of such experiences. Consider asking a second person to frame the story in the reading of a Psalm of lament, such as Psalm 88:

¹ O LORD, God of my salvation, when, at night, I cry out in your presence, ² let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry. ³ For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. ⁴ I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; I am like those who have no help, ⁵ like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand. ⁸ You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape; ⁹ my eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call on you, O LORD; I spread out my hands to you.

Story of lamentation

¹³ But I, O LORD, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. ¹⁴ O LORD, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me? ¹⁵ Wretched and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am desperate. ¹⁶ Your wrath has swept over me; your dread assaults destroy me. ¹⁷ They surround me like a flood all day long; from all sides they close in on me. ¹⁸ You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me; my companions are in darkness.

Confession and Commitment

(Prepare people for a time for prayers of confession. Have ribbons close at hand.)

Prayer of Confession

Creator and creating God,
You have made us in your image, and we thank you.

Today we celebrate with wonder that you have made all people in your image, even though each person we meet looks different, sounds different, and acts differently from the next. Your creativity amazes us, and your love for all of your children surrounds us.

These are gifts we want to hold onto, God, the ones we don't have to give up in order to share them. We hold onto your promise of love, through our pain, and through our mistakes. We hold onto your love so that we might be loving, too, toward all those we encounter. We hold onto your creativity, revelling in the beauty of the world around us, and being inspired by the great diversity of your creation. We hold onto your creativity, desiring to be creative too. We see your creative gifts expressed in art and song and words and ideas, and also in conflict transformation, in the ability to find new hope, and in re-imagining your Church.

But today we confess, God, that we have not always been creative, and we have not always been loving. We confess too, that we are sometimes complicit with a society that is not always creative in the face of new opportunities, and that is not always loving to all of its members.

On a day when our international community is raising its voice to end racial discrimination, we raise our voices to you, asking that we might be your instruments to uproot hatred based on race, religion, or culture. In the silence of our hearts, we name the acts of hatred we have witnessed, ignored, or even taken ourselves – words spoken out of ignorance, assumption, or prejudice, actions meant to hurt and exclude, walls that are built with no-one brave enough to tear them down.

We confess our part in this pain, gracious God, both in our action and our inaction. We confess our part in the building of dividing walls between cultures, races, and religions, and also lament the walls that we have witnessed, or to which we been oblivious.

Help us to let go of the things we carry that allow these walls to be built. Transform us, God, that we might be lights of transformation in our communities. Give us strength to press on toward the goal.

In the strong name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

Ritual

Invite people to let go of the things we carry that allow walls to be built. The congregation will be led in (joyfully!) singing **Break Dividing Walls** (David Ruis). All may come forward and tie their ribbon to the branches (perhaps beside a cross). As they return to their seats, they claim a new ribbon, pinned to a card on which words of commitment are written. We commit to pressing on for transformation of the things we have left at the cross into a message of God's love for all in Christ.

Words of Assurance

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. God is about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? God will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert for us, the people God formed for God's self so that we might declare God's praise! (from Isaiah 43:18, 19, 21)

Song of praise

Suggestions:

HWB 111 O praise the gracious power

HWB 299 New earth, heavens new

HWB 322 For we are strangers no more
HWB 323 Beyond a dying sun
HWB 579 Lift every voice and sing

Congregational Prayer

Sending

Sending word of blessing

Go now, in the presence of God our creator, in the footsteps of Jesus our brother, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Break down walls of hatred and racism in the name of Christ, who calls us into a new creation. Not that we have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but we press on to make it our own, because Christ Jesus has made us his own (cf. Phil 3:12).

Song of sending

Suggestions:

STJ 2 Hamba nathi (Come, walk with us)
HWB 226 You are salt for the earth
HWB 420 Heart with loving heart united
HWB 397 God loves all his many people

Developed by Alissa Bender, First Mennonite Church, Calgary

Brainstorming group:

Doug Klassen, Foothills Mennonite Church
Derek Cook, Foothills Mennonite Church
Kim Thiessen, Foothills Mennonite Church
Dave Funk, Abbeydale Christian Fellowship

At the request of the Calgary Mennonite Ministerial