



**Mennonite
World Conference**

A Community of Anabaptist
related Churches

**Congreso
Mundial Menonita**

Una Comunidad de
Iglesias Anabautistas

**Conférence
Mennonite Mondiale**

Une Communauté
d'Eglises Anabaptistes

Report

Mennonite World Conference Peace Commission Peace Audit: Summary and Commentary, June 2012

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The Peace Commission self-assessment questionnaire to the 100 member churches had one basic question: “How is your church doing in its desire to be a Peace Church?”

We requested a 4-5 page written response. We received 21 responses (21% of MWC member churches) as follows:

From Asia and Pacific Continent

1. Brethren in Christ Church Orissa, India
2. Bihar Mennonite Mandli, India
3. Gilgal Mission Trust, India
4. Fellowship of Mennonite Churches in Taiwan
5. Persatuan Gereja-Gereja Kristen Muria Indonesia
6. Gereja Injili di Tanah Jawa (oral report), Indonesia

From Latin American and the Caribbean

1. Hermandad en Cristo, Colombia
2. Convención Iglesias Evangélicas Hermanos Menonitas Nivacle, Paraguay
3. Iglesia Evangélica Menonita de El Salvador
4. Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Hondureña, Honduras
5. Konferenz der Mennonitengemeinden in Uruguay
6. The Mennonite Church of Trinidad and Tobago

From Europe

1. British Conference of Mennonites, United Kingdom
2. Arbeitsgemeinschaft Mennonitischer Gemeinden in Deutschland, Germany
3. Asociación de Menonitas y Hermanos en Cristo en España, Spain

From North America

1. Evangelical Mennonite Conference, Canada
2. Mennonite Church Canada
3. Conservative Mennonite Conference, USA
4. Mennonite Church USA
5. U.S. Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches
6. Brethren in Christ General Conference, North America

Unfortunately, we received no responses from Africa.

What did we learn?

The responses provided profound windows into the lives of MWC member churches. There are numerous ways to summarize what can be seen through these windows.

Window #1:

At a very basic level, the responses highlighted the following:

1. All respondents were fully conscious that their desired identity is that of being a Peace Church.
2. All respondents indicated significant and creative ways that they are working at strengthening their identity as Peace Churches.
3. Most respondents pointed to important “official” statements (vision and mission statements, Confessions of Faith, historical foundational documents, etc.) that identified them as churches with a Peace Church vision.
4. All respondents indicated a gap (some wider than others) separating the official statements of the church and the practice of the life of the church and congregations.
5. All respondents identified important challenges they face in their efforts at being a Peace Church. These challenges varied due to context, but were similar in the profound nature of the challenges.
6. Respondents indicated that the understanding of peace is migrating from a reactive mode (*do no harm to others*) to an active mode (*do good for others*).
7. All respondents indicated a need for additional resources and resourcing as they engage their desires to be Peace Churches.

Window #2:

Several key dimensions emerged in the responses received, each of them requiring careful attention. These are:

1. **Theological Grounding**
The biblical/theological foundations of the parameters of peace witness are critical and require sustained attention.
2. **Strength**
MWC member-churches vary significantly in the strength they have in promoting and practicing peace.
3. **Challenges and Contexts**
The varying contexts generate a wide range of challenges that MWC member-churches are now facing and living in.
4. **Strategic Groups**
MWC member churches identified a wide range of people groups, both inside and outside the church, that need to be carefully considered as strategic “target” groups to focus the identity and activities of peace witness.
5. **Broadening the Horizon**
MWC member churches identify a very wide and creative range of activity and ministry already directed at issues of peacemaking and reconciliation into both established and new frontiers.

Window #3:

The five categories identified above can be amplified substantially with the information and details provided by the respondents. We present some of that as follows:

1. **Theological Grounding**
MWC member-churches identified the wholeness of *shalom* as a key element in our understandings of God’s intentions for peace. The pervasive presence of God’s concern for *shalom* helps us understand peace as a foundational value of the Kingdom of God itself. Peace is also seen as being integral in our understandings of the Triune God. Peace is not only the intention and desire of God, it is at the centre of Jesus’ ministry and teaching, and is possible only with the power of the Holy Spirit that can help the church in

overcoming the fear that enclaves the church and the world in ways of non-*shalom*. North American member-churches pointed to creation, and humanity's creation in the image of God, as foundational to respecting the sanctity of all of life. From Indonesia a member-church indicated that Christian peacemaking should be based on the virtues of love, truth, peace, justice, and the integrity of creation. From India a member-church indicated that in order to become a "peacemaking" church, we have to start from "inner-change" which can only happen through the "acceptance of Jesus Christ." From Trinidad and Tobago we heard that "Jesus Christ is the source of real peace!"

2. Strengths

Several strengths for peacemaking stand out among MWC member-churches around the world. There are many outstanding theologians among MWC member-churches, from both Mennonite and non-Mennonite backgrounds. Peace is taught in the homes and congregations of our member-churches. Peacemaking virtues are systematically elaborated, discussed, and promoted to church members through teaching materials for children, teenagers, youth, women, and general church members. Member-churches also understand personal evangelism as introducing people to the true peace that comes through Jesus Christ. In Indonesia Youth groups are striving to promote interfaith peacemaking together with the Moslem youth. In Trinidad and Tobago there are courageous steps underway to reform the church's organizational structure in order to accommodate peacemaking and to serve society better.

3. Challenges and Contexts

The contextual challenges of member-churches in their desire to be Peace Churches are truly daunting and awe-inspiring at the same time. The nature of the responses makes this the longest and most detailed part of the self-assessment. But the profound realities facing member-churches must be honored in this report. What follows is a sampling of the challenges identified. Selected responses are identified by region to highlight the challenges faced by MWC member churches in their diverse contexts.

- A gradual process of acculturation into dominant context;
- Influence of theologically conservative evangelicalism;
- Church growth among people not familiar with the peace church tradition;
- Ministers recruited into pastoral service without a clear commitment to foundational beliefs in peace;
- The absence of contemporary stories of peacemaking and nonviolence;
- The association of "peace" with the "fighting" spirit of the anti-war movement of the 1960s (USA);
- In seeking to be open about our disagreements and to find a way forward together, we have sometimes alienated those who wanted shorter less painful conversations and quicker decisions and have sometimes exhausted those who were willing to give time to hearing and seeking to understand each other;
- Living in a wealthy country where the defaults for daily life are often hard on the poor and on the planet, we find it a challenge to seek to live simply and generously;
- Our congregation tends to be fairly homogeneous despite meeting in an ethnically and socially mixed area;
- We tend to shy away from explicitly inviting all people to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, focusing more on seeking to serve, act for justice and care for creation;
- Although fortnightly small groups offer accountability, for those who seek it, in some areas of life, we have not found a way of looking together at the question of how, at the personal practical level, each of us shares our possessions with those in need;
- Justice is often associated with retribution, and this is prevalent;
- Social and political issues seem very distant from the life of the church;
- Dealing with the needy in the church. We have a "basket of love" but we need to do

more;

- Issue of gender and “machoism” is still present, although not dominant;
- There is little awareness of environmental issues. Need to pay more attention to this;
- While most would have a strong sense of evangelization, given that most members are Latin Americans, we have not yet understood how to do this well in Spanish culture (Spain);
- The gravest temptation of the church is to have a cross-less church or a church without suffering;
- A church with gold and silver but with no Jesus and his cross cannot bring salvation;
- A church where the leaders behave like lords is actually betraying the lordship of Jesus Christ;
- The idea of active peacemaking, restorative justice, and conflict mediation are not generally part of the church’s vocabulary and ministries;
- A challenge is the political tension between China and Taiwan. China has thousands of missiles poised to strike Taiwan, and Taiwan is heavily armed. This militarized atmosphere is a challenge for the Mennonite church, at the same time an opportunity for witness to the gospel of peace (Taiwan);
- In our country we experience different types of violence: armed groups, common delinquency, family violence, the poverty of thousands of persons because of systems of corruption, among others. We are conscious that to preach and live the gospel can lead to persecution here. But we consider that the gospel of Jesus Christ is pertinent and necessary for our country (Colombia);
- We are challenged by the influences of a militaristic culture, the tendencies of human nature, and Christians of different persuasion (USA).
- We consider Anabaptism to be evangelical, but face the challenge of some congregations employing a low-key approach to the doctrine of non-resistance in favour of an evangelicalism weak in Anabaptist emphasis (USA).
- The influence of non-Anabaptist theology is and has been a challenge to our unity and desire to be a Peace Church, as has the influences from popular culture (Canada).
- We are mostly self-sufficient, affluent and comfortable while living in a poor and painful world, and reconciling that contrast has proven to be a challenge (Canada).
- We are tempted to diminish our focus of reaching for the ideal presented by Christ and we are tempted to separate ourselves from that ideal, too. Thus, in the diluting process we are losing our passion to Christ, and our affluent independence has reduced our need and motivation to nurture community. Without a Christ centred theology, our desire to be a Peace Church can fade into re-enactments of outdated traditions or it can take on innuendoes of humanistic rationalizations for peacemaking (Canada).
- We are now blended in our culture, and we need to re-invest in building bonds to each other, locally and nationally, as faithful followers of Christ (Canada).
- The caste system is present also in the church, and that it is difficult to live out our vision for this (India).
- During the India/Pakistan war, it would have been very risky to talk about love of enemies; we are all sinful, and are part of the sinful system (India).
- A special challenge is to find ways of bringing the Gospel to the higher castes, because Christianity is usually associated with the lower castes. It is very difficult, socially, politically, and in the family for an upper caste person to consider Christianity (India).
- The most commonly-mentioned barriers to acceptance of the Christian faith are ancestor worship and the foreignness of Christianity (Taiwan).
- How to overcome fear. Fear has many faces, but its presence is an obstacle identified by many in different contexts.
- Many Mennonites have difficulty to be open to disagreements. Peace is misunderstood as simple agreement where there is no disagreement and little room for differing

opinions and standing positions.

- Forgiving the Enemies is a virtue that is almost extinct. Included in this challenge is the misconception of divine justice understood merely in terms of retribution.
- In our culture, young people, especially, have difficulty to love and make peace with their enemies.
- Does the desire to embrace others hinder our witness for peace?
- Some people, especially youth, resist the demand of the church for the acceptance of pacifism as requirement for baptism. These people are not ready to embrace pacifism and do not see it necessary for becoming church members.
- Openness to cooperation with non-Mennonite institutions also means the infiltration of non-Mennonite theological influences into Mennonite circle. This infiltration is inevitable. Thus the challenge will be how to maintain Anabaptist peace theology and ethics, and at the same time also collaborate with others who do not embrace the same theology and ethics. For some MWC member churches, the challenge is more specific on how we have to give peace witness while living among Reformed and Pentecostal/Charismatic churches, as well as among people of other faiths.
- There is still a huge gap between the rich and the poor in Mennonite communities. The challenge is not only how to eradicate poverty and narrow down the gap between the rich and the poor, but also how to live simply and generously so that we can share goods with the needy.

4. **Strategic Groups**

Some strategic groups identified as the groups that MWC member churches can reach out to in order to be truly present as peace church and to promote peace are as follow:

- Neighborhood
- Indigenous and native communities
- Children and youth
- Young couples
- Pastors – to get higher education and/or trainings in peace studies
- Vulnerable and often neglected peoples such as abused women, down-syndrome children, elderly
- MWC for the stronger bond

5. **Broadening the Horizon**

Many MWC member churches broaden the concept and practice of peacemaking. Some of these efforts are the following:

- Idolatry, that often becomes a hindrance for peacemaking, also includes money, work, and culture, not simply conventional idols;
- The church should not rely too much on government for change. The church should become the agent of change;
- Using arts, music, and sports as well as social media to promote peace, especially among youth;
- Replacing military service with other kinds of service (e.g. education, agriculture, etc.) in order to bring peace and welfare in the country;
- Collecting contemporary stories of heroic peacemaking and non-violent actions so that MWC member churches have resources of good samples of modern Anabaptist peacemakers;
- Credentialing and providing continuing education for pastors to strengthen peace community. This includes getting some talented pastors to have formal advanced education in peace and conflict transformation studies;
- Establishing School of Peace for children that meets mid-weekly.

Concluding Comments

The responses to the audit demonstrate both good and bad news. The good news is that it is evident that the consciousness of being a Peace Church is deeply embedded in the identity of the MWC member-churches that responded. The bad news is the pervasive complexity in moving from what is desired and written on paper, to becoming a bedrock part of the life of the Christian life and community. It is evident that the challenges to being a Peace Church are enormous. Each context identifies factors that make it complex. It is clear that to be a Peace Church implies a very conscious decision and dedicated effort to be so. There is a combination of identity (how we understand ourselves) and behaviour (how we act in light of who we say we are): both need to be strengthened.

Are there indications of what MWC can do to help strengthen the peace identity of its membership? There are not many concrete suggestions. The 7 *Shared Convictions* are affirmed as an important piece. A more intangible yet very important piece, identified by many, is a sense of solidarity, identity, and belonging that MWC provides to the member churches. It is hard to quantify this sense, but it's obviously critical for the life of the churches.

We want to thank each participating church for its response. Each one has shared deeply and vulnerably. And we are grateful for this. The Peace Commission of MWC has already spent an entire day trying to grapple with the implications of what we have heard. Some program plans that respond to what we have heard are already under way. More will surely follow.

It is fitting to conclude this report by listening carefully to this important reminder from one of the member-churches:

It is essential that we realize that we, the ecclesia of God, the church as we know it, is indeed made up of us sinful human beings. We need to remember that we are not the kingdom of God which is to come, but called to be a faithful witness to and for the coming of God's reign. But the fact of God's reign being delayed should not leave us to be careless about the teaching of Jesus, who said "blessed are the peacemakers". We are God's people called to proclaim and to illustrate what God's purpose is for all human kind and always to be a witness to the coming reign of God. And as St. Paul said, we are called to bear the fruits of the spirit demonstrating love, joy and peace and all the other fruits. It is this amazing community which can show the world how we must relate to one another as a sign of God's reign. (Gilgal Mission Trust, India).