Fellowship of Hope Mennonite Church
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Good morning. It's hard to believe that in about 2 weeks I will be leaving for Paraguay to attend the 15th gathering of MWC! The preparations for the trip have been happening in various ways over the past number of months and it is thanks to the support of many, including you at Fellowship of Hope, that this trip is possible for me. Preparing my message for this morning has been a helpful way of getting ready for the trip, as I have enjoyed connecting my understandings of the global Mennonite church with the lectionary texts. So first, let's engage the text in 2 Cor. According to the commentary in my bible, ch. 6:1-10, are a part of a larger grouping of verses that speak of the churches existence as a ministry of reconciliation. If we think about these verses within the context of the global church, which parts do we find ourselves relating to as a North American church?

It's my guess that we, as a predominately white church in North America, find it a bit hard to relate to beatings, imprisonment, riots, hunger.... in the context of the global church it would be easy to assign most of the suffering and struggle to churches in the global South or to minority churches within the United States. However I believe it is unhealthy to think about only certain parts of the church as struggling. That's why we need to understand what we're struggling with in the global North, particularly as Christians with material wealth. While today I will talk about the church in terms of global North and South, I believe that our church in North America is not monolithic. As North American Mennonites we are a diverse group and in some ways mirror what is happening around the world. Just as the vibrancy and growth in the church has shifted to the global South, so too the growth in the North American Mennonite church has been in our congregations of color. Ours may not be a physical imprisonment (in the global North), for example, but an imprisonment of our minds. Only with an awareness of our own struggles can we work in solidarity with the church in the global South and truly become a reconciling community of faith.

In recent months I have engaged the work of Mary Jo Leddy, a Catholic practical theologian from Toronto, who speaks clearly to North American Christians about our captivity. According to Leddy, "In some situations the prophetic call involves saying to those who are oppressed, 'go free.' But in other situations, such as our own, the prophetic task is to say to those who think they are free, 'You are in captivity.'" She goes on then to explain our captivity to consumerism and names it as something much deeper than just the impulse to spend lots of money. Hers is a healthy critique for us Mennonites,

especially those of us at Fellowship of Hope, who value simple living and think critically about the ways we spend out money. She names the root issues as a pervasive mentality of dissatisfaction. Again, I quote Leddy, this time at length:

> There are people, religiously committed people and men and women of good will, who hunger and thirst for justice. However, if this hunger for justice is more akin to a craving for a more just and perfect world, then even the finest efforts for justice will replicate the patterns of craving that lie close to the heart of our culture... Social critique is essential, but it can become a generalized judgement that nothing or no one, including oneself, is good enough. Such social dissatisfaction eventually consumes even those working for justice... Genuine social and political change can happen only if it is based on or accompanied by an attempt to transform the spirit of craving and dissatisfaction. Otherwise, this spirit can consume even the attempts to construct an alternative to it. Such radical transformation is risky because the spirit of craving can consume even its enemies and critics. We may, for example, attempt to stifle the spirit of craving by living a simpler lifestyle only to find ourselves consumed with the thought that we are never living simply enough.[1]

How then are we to overcome this mentality of dissatisfaction? How are we to "have nothing, yet possess everything?" as 2 Cor. says. I believe one way to overcome our captivity is through relationship with our sisters and brothers in the global South. They are the ones who show us how to live generously while possessing little or no material wealth. If Barb Fridley was here this morning I would ask her to share about her experience in Zimbabwe, at the last Mennonite World Conference. As many of you know, she was overwhelmed by the hospitality of the African Mennonites there. Although possessing little, they welcomed Mennonites from around the world into their homes and served meal after meal.

Currently there are 1.5 million Anabaptists, and only 25% of that 1.5 million live in the global north. Yet, this 25% control 95% of the financial resources in the Mennonite churches. Hence, 75% (Global South) control 5% of the resources. This kind of financial imbalance, which also creates a power imbalance, gets in the way of unity between the global north and south. Often this is because those of us in the global north believe that we can solve the world problems with money and Western ways of thinking. We propose solutions along these lines, without recognition of our captivity. In our rush to bring about justice in the world, we do not empower our sisters and brothers around the world to have control over how their needs are addressed. Instead of working solidarity, we perpetuate power-imbalances. Instead of listening to those in the global South, we make decisions for them. This is not the way into the future for the Mennonite church, for clearly we see it is not the way of Shalom.

In 1 Sam we recognize that the relationship between Jonathan and David won't be maintained easily. These young people were on opposing teams – Jonathan was closely connected to the powerful

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[1] Mary Jo Leddy, *Radical Gratitude* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 31.

in Israel and David was seen as a threat to the powerful. Despite the threat he posed, or because of it, in some cases, David's following grew and eventually he took the place of king Saul who had been rejected by God. Although David was not without fault, he was chosen by God to lead God's people.

Today in the global Mennonite church there are young people making commitments to each other, despite difficult odds – distance, socio-economic difference, cross-cultural communication. These young people will be gathering at Global Youth Conference in Paraguay to discuss the meaning of service and to vision together about the future of the global Mennonite Church. The future of the churches in North America depend on the future of the global family.

In the past 10 years there has not only been a shift in population to the Global South but also a shift in age. Although in the United States the average age of a Mennonite has risen. (see Kanagy's work, *Road Signs for the Journey*), in the global church it has decreased. Young adults around the globe are identifying their gifts and becoming involved. This is why Global youth Conference is so important.

YAMEN, an MCC program in the Global South, allows for churches in the global south the work together and get to know each other. This program was birthed out of a concern about the dominant flow from the global north to the global south... which reiterated unhealthy power-imbalances in the church. (see Courier article,, 2009, 2, p. 14)

So, when we talk about the struggles of the church, we recognize that it includes lots of stuff... our captivity to dissatisfaction and the injustice we are aware of around the world. But, that doesn't mean we need to be in control. As the North American church we don't have to do everything. There are faithful brothers and sisters around the world who are working faithfully, who we can support. This is how we join in what God is doing. Whenever you hear news about another country, take a moment to pray for Christian congregations in those countries. And at the same time, continue to work for justice here. Christians around the world are praying for us, just as we are praying for them.

In Psalm 133 the Psalmist speaks of kindred being united. Are we kindred as a global Mennonite church? How do we become kindred with our sisters and brother around the globe? We do this by understanding ourselves, our strengths and weaknesses and entering into relationships of mutuality. This begins by listening to each other's stories. Story-telling can happen in a number of ways. It happens when we travel to other parts of the Mennonite world or when we receive travelers as guests. It happens as we read or watch documentaries about the global church. In preparation for the MWC, Courier has been focusing on Paraguay in its last number of issues. Edgar Stoesz has also

recently published a books about the Mennonites in Paraguay. And most recently Goshen College has approved and begun work on The Center for the Study of Global Anabaptism. I'm sure some of you are already aware of development of the Center. The first point of its mission and goals is stated in the following way: "[the Center will] provide a setting where leaders from different parts of the global Anabaptist church are able to encounter one another in honest and vulnerable ways regarding attitudes and issues that divide Christians living in different societies." Furthermore, the rationale behind the Center is directly related to the shifts within the global Mennonite body.

> "The worldwide Mennonite communion has witnessed dramatic growth, particularly in Central/South America and in Africa. These trends within the Mennonite church are part of a much larger phenomenon that is transforming the face of the Christian church. Understanding the dynamics of this global shift from north to South will be crucial in future mission and identity of all North American Christians, especially including MC USA. As custodians of a rich theological and historical tradition, we have much to share with the global Mennonite church, but the survival of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition in North America may ultimately depend on our willingness to learn from our brothers and sisters in the global south."

With the realities in mind of what separates us as a global Mennonite church... which are the obstacles we must overcome in order to be in solidarity as a global church... we recognize the need for divine intervention. In Mark 4 this is exactly what we find. My Bible commentary calls this event an epiphany of divine power. Those on the boat realize that they are no match for the storm that has whipped up around them, and hence they shake Jesus awake and ask him to please help them.

One such storm that has whipped up in the Mennonite world, is due to misconceptions about the Dutch Mennonite church. Earlier this year, while taking the course Anabaptist History and Theology with John Rempel at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, he stated that the Dutch Mennonite Church serve as a warning sign to the rest of us (meaning Mennonite/Anabaptist churches around the world). They show us, he said, what happens if the church does not have strong boundary lines about its beliefs. When I heard these statements from John, I was not surprised since I knew the Dutch Mennonite church was in the middle of secular Europe and was also very wealthy. In recent months, those judgments about the Dutch Mennonites have been called into question. During this time my good friend Sarah Thompson, who many of you know, was in Europe getting to know the Dutch Mennonites on their turf. These interactions are chronicled in a paper that Sarah just finished, titled, "Is the Dutch Mennonite Church a Warning Sign?" When she asked leaders in the Dutch church how they felt about Rempel's statement, this is what she found (quoting Sarah):

"The idea that some around world considered them a warning sign (and a significant number of

people do) because of their liberal Biblical hermeneutics, open tendencies with regards to church membership guidelines, wealth, and negotiation with their secularized context came as a surprise to most people I interviewed. Henk Leegte, the internationally popular pastor... in Amsterdam, directly refuted the idea. He proposed instead of a warning sign, they are the vanguard. He elaborated, saying,

> 'The choice for Mennonites has always existed between adaptation and separation. There have been many times that splits have happened in the Mennonite church where one group chose to adapt and the other chose to separate. The Dutch have continually chosen to adapt. In many ways, the North American church is simply 30 years behind the Dutch, and many other churches in Europe…2'"

Another church leader responded in this way:

> "We are making a big effort to let the world know who we are, the history we carry, and that we want to be in discussion with the global church. There seem to be misconceptions about us, and it is hurtful to hear that we should just give our money and not have any input in global conversation. We are trying to be faithful in our context, just like everyone else in theirs."

In the end the Dutch asked for those around the world who viewed them in a negative light to get to know them and their context. In a country where there are NGOs for every cause, the church has taken responsibility to reach out to the least of these. Some churches have halfway houses, welcome refugees, minister to drug abusers and provide direct hospitality to those who need homes by sharing their homes. These churches also provide us with examples of how to live faithfully in a post-christendom context. According to Sarah,

> "Christianity was never meant to be wedded with world Empire. The post-Christendom context is a gift in that it enables a freedom to believe and to witness without de-facto collusion with the dominant and oppressive societal and governmental powers. It is a new era in which Christianity can return to the grassroots level, giving hope for daily life and edifying alternative communities that look beyond themselves for strength and guidance. Building on their history, the Dutch Mennonites are uniquely positioned to facilitate this shift and support the growth of creative new ideas.3"

Through Sarah's experience with the Dutch we see that negative stereotypes of the Dutch do not match up with reality and are easily overcome when relationships are cultivated. And this is how reconciliation happens... this is how storms are calmed. When we meet each other and share stories, we are then able to work together to bring about shalom on earth. Because shalom, we realise, only comes about when the church values the diversity of gifts from all of God's people. So together we walk forward as the global Mennonite church, with all of our strengths AND weaknesses, we are

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[2] Leegte, Henk. Personal Interview. 23 April 2009.

[3] Pastor Henk Leegte is also part of international dialogues in his capacity as a theologian…he is part of the World Council of Churches (WCC) Interreligious Dialogue Forum. The Dutch Mennonite Conference is one of the only national Mennonite bodies (Germany and one conference in Congo being the others) that participants in the WCC.

becoming a reconciled community. believing that divine power is at work within us.

Therefore as we think about ourselves as part of a global church in light of today's biblical texts, we recognize that unity is possible when we know our story, we engage the stories of others, we give and receive gifts mutually, we commit to each other despite opposition and difference, and when we believe that the Divine is at work within us. Then with the Psalmist we can affirm:

"How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in peace!" (Ps. 133:1)

Amen.