

Mennonite World Conference
A community of Anabaptist-related churches
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Mennonites and Catholics seek common ground to work for peace

Hamburg, Germany - German Catholics and Mennonites assembled here September 21-22 for a conference on the "Healing of memories." The conference was a joint response of the Association of Mennonite Congregations in Germany (AMG) and the roman-catholic German Bishops-Conference to the official report, "Called Together to be Peacemakers," on the 1998 to 2003 dialogue between representatives of Mennonite World Conference and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

Dialogue itself can be a means of healing, said Stephan Loos from the Katholische Akademie Hamburg (Catholic Academy in Hamburg). It was "in a spirit of friendship and reconciliation" that he greeted the participants. Understanding one another, Loos said, involves changing and growing beyond one's self and coming to understanding means attaining a new spiritual freedom. When we come to understand the experiences of faith present in other confessions, we lay a foundation for becoming peacemakers together, he noted.

Fernando Enns, Mennonite director of the Institute for Theology of the Peace Churches at Hamburg University, emphasized that it is the call of the Gospel, not merely curiosity or subjective interest, that leads us to listen to one another. "One body, one spirit, one Lord, one faith and one baptism" can only take place when there is unity in the spirit through the bond of peace (Eph. 4: 3-5). The healing of memories must take place at the congregational level; otherwise the whole church suffers, he said.

John Radano from the Pontifical Council agreed, noting that we need to state differences openly, overcome conflicts and work toward unity "so that the world may believe" that Christ has been sent from the Father. Where division exists, the gospel becomes implausible. Reconciliation with God includes reconciliation with each other and this common spirit makes it possible for us to work together for peace, an essential component for unity among Christians.

Andrea Lange, Mennonite member of the international Mennonite-Catholic dialogue, spoke candidly about her initial reservations: Was the invitation of the Vatican an attempt to get Mennonites to return to the Roman Catholic fold? She remains sceptical about the Catholic notion of the Eucharist as a sacrament, in strong contrast to the Mennonite concept and practice of the Lord's supper, yet, she sees engaging in a fearless examination of sacramental theology as desirable.

Lange also spoke of the importance of talking about what we mean by "making peace," including love of our enemies. As disciples of Jesus, Christians must reject every form of institutionalized violence. Lange observed that every dialogue requires us to look at our own point of view and should also become a testimony to the gospel so that the world may believe.

In a critical examination of church history in the dialogue paper, Hans-Jürgen Goertz spoke about the limits and opportunities available to the historian. Dialogue partners must be honest in examining their histories together but church historians cannot take responsibility for theological discussion. The historian can comment on historical events but it is the duty of the theologians to release the churches from the prison of history.

The discussion related to section two of the joint report, "Considering Theology Together," proved to be delicate. Wolfgang Thönissen from the Institute for Ecumenical Studies in Paderborn focused on the need for a visible unity of the church. Although Catholics still hold to the practice of baptizing infants and making them church members, they also wish to claim that faith and baptism are equally important and that the church is understood to be the community of "resolute believers." Respect for the faith of other religious communities has also grown, said Thönissen.

In his reply, Fernando Enns heartily endorsed the step from "considering theology together" to "doing theology together." There are considerable hurdles that need to be surmounted. The Catholic Church begins theological discussion with holy scripture, holy tradition and the doctrinal authority of the church, whereas Mennonites focus on examining and correcting life and practice in the light of scripture.

How are we to understand our common call to become peacemakers? Is reconciliation of our traditions possible when one side actively seeks to work together with the state while the other remains sceptical of political authority? The issue of "just war" theology has not been satisfactorily discussed yet, nor the issue of active non-violence. Mutual recognition of baptism remains on the agenda and Mennonites need to clarify their position.

On Friday evening, the mid-point of the conference, an ecumenical service was held in the Mennonite Church in Hamburg-Altona. Dr. Jaschke, who represented the German Council of Bishops, preached on a passage frequently cited as a favourite of Menno Simons: "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11).

"The breath of the spirit breathes upon us tonight," said Jaschke, "because Christ is our foundation and remains our foundation

The path toward healing can only take place on the path of Christ. Just as the dispute between Peter and Paul could only be resolved by a common reflection on the centrality of Christ, so also we should maintain our focus on Jesus. We are called to repentance, so that we can act in love, mercy and responsibility toward the world.

Finally, Larry Miller, general secretary of Mennonite World Conference, greeted all the Mennonites and Catholics in the name of MWC. Miller thanked the churches in Germany for their efforts to discuss the results of the international dialogue and offered some perspectives for future encounters, especially the upcoming meeting in Rome, October 18-23.

A communicative discussion of such intensity could hardly be organised more compactly. A special thanks is due to Fernando Enns for excellent planning. - from a report by Oskar Wedel for *Die Brücke*, translated by James Jakob Fehr

Photos by James Jakob Fehr available on request:

1. (l to r): Bishop Dr Jaschke and Bernhard Thiessen, pastor of the Mennonite Church in Hamburg-Altona, at the close of the ecumenical worship service on Friday evening.
2. Participants in the conference.
3. (l to r): Bishop Dr Jaschke, Larry Miller, and Fernando Enns leading discussion

Mennonite World Conference is a communion (*Koinonia*) of Anabaptist-related churches linked to one another in a worldwide community of faith for fellowship, worship, service, and witness.
