

Courage to love in the ways we confess:

First a bit about me: I am the daughter of an Anabaptist Historian father – and a Mennonite mother from Switzerland whose father was the first generation to come out of the mountains because it was now safe and legal to do so after centuries of persecution. I am a music historian – with a focus on church music history. I have studied and have a deep passion for exploring and understanding identity expressed in worship, .... the how.... of music and culture. I think history helps us understand where we have come from and, when explored honestly, can protect us from the trauma of pendulum swings..... And then we correct course, by the grace of God!

I am also a student of cultural ways! I spent 20 years at the Edmonton Mennonite for Newcomers, and have always been interested in inter-cultural, ecumenical and interfaith relationships. That is why I answered the call to serve as Bridge Building Facilitator and the call to pastor an Inter-cultural church. And so what I will share today is drawing on how I have put together a narrative of Anabaptist history, and how I have learned, and keep learning how to consider and reconsider the principles underlying this history through the lens of new cultures and traditions that keep entering the rich stream of history we are illuminating this year!

As Mennonite Christians we answer to the high calling of discipleship! We have a perfect example of God's ways in Jesus, and we strive even in our incompleteness to live by all of Jesus' teachings.

A bit about confession: I will propose that Confession is both universal and culturally driven. It is universal in that all of us start from and with the same human heart that can get clouded over with sin! But it is culturally driven in that what clouds or muddles our connection to God, in Jesus grows out of our life experiences, and these experiences can differ widely from individual to individual, from community to community and from culture to culture. I hope what I share speaks to and includes much of the diversity in this room!

Slide 1: From the Anabaptist 500 tool kit: “Penitence, a primary theme in early Anabaptist spirituality, can correct our tendency as modern Anabaptists to practice discipleship as a form of spiritual and practical mastery rather than as a habit of repentance. A phrase repeated often in early Anabaptist spiritual writings is “Bend the knees of my heart.” We are being invited to practice discipleship as a habit of – repentance – of striving, falling short, accepting grace and forgiveness and striving again. And only in that humble posture can the true Zeal for the Lord grow and thrive!!!!

Confession and zeal must go hand in hand!

On the topic of zeal, let us consider a cautionary scripture for our time from Revelation 3:14–22.

Are we hot? Cold? Or lukewarm? Are we ready to be loved through rebuke and discipline? Are we ready to hear God’s knock? Let us consider all of this through the lens of history, which, with the help and power of the Holy Spirit, will help all of us hear the Knock of God today – in the present world we live in – in our history in the making!!!

We come together today with a heart of gratitude for what God has done through our faith sojourn for 500 years+ for eternity, really – since the very beginning – and from all corners of the earth – Switzerland, Russia, South Sudan, Liberia, Congo, Myanmar, Ethiopia – congregating today in Calgary! Hallelujah! And we come with a mind ready to consider and reconsider principles of this sojourn for our current time – and to confess where we get off balance. Our faith journey is a constant recalibrating to bring us back into the balance of true discipleship to our Lord and Saviour.

In the MWC resource “Anabaptist Tradition’ Reclaiming its gifts, heeding its weaknesses,” Mennonite church history and ethics professor Hanspeter Jecker from Bienenberg Theological Seminary in Switzerland gives us a beautiful framework to consider confession and rebalancing or recalibrating through the lens of history. I would like to unpack the framework he offers us together. You all heard about the birth of the Anabaptist movement hosted by the mother of Felix Manz --- where 13 people gathered in her home to witness a believer’s baptism! And the growth of this movement in

spite of its perceived threat and criminality! Felix was drowned in the Limat River.... What a time to be a Christian! I think most of us will agree that our Anabaptist forbears were on fire for the Lord – inspired by the stories of Acts. Anabaptists were ready to change themselves and society around them through devoted discipleship to our Lord. They were ready to “do the right thing” first -- and figure out how to deal with the consequences later – even unto death. They were on fire for the Jesus Way of love and sacrifice and reconciliation of all things. And so the question for us today is: what are we on fire for? Or are we “neither hot nor cold” as referenced in our passage from Revelations. Let us confess, and let us accept the grace offered us to nurture and kindle the Zeal God is gifting us with – if we will only open our eyes, ears and hearts! Let us see where this takes us.

If we consider the 1527 Schleithim document of unity and other early Anabaptist writings that helped settle this movement into a faith tradition, Mennonite faith weaves together the following: the central place of scripture, voluntary commitment to God in Jesus, authenticity of personal faith, separation of church and state and non-conformity to the world; fruits of repentance through discipleship; love of enemy and refusal to pick up arms in the face of violence.

These are our web of inherited treasures – but as with all things handled by humans, there is risk in getting out of balance.

According to Hanspeter, there are six areas for us to consider as we seek to confess imbalance, and through that recalibrate and recommit to a courage and zeal to love as our Lord taught us -- for our present day! And I believe that in all six of these points, where we get in trouble is that we make these treasures the goal rather than the outcome of a living discipleship to our Lord and Saviour. When a treasure becomes a goal – it means we have taken control – and only God is in control!

As I go through these six points, I will share a story from my inter-cultural experiences that I hope can contribute to our rebalancing together.

1. “The Anabaptist emphasis on the voluntary nature of faith has sometimes led to an over-emphasis on the human contribution. One’s own individual “yes” to God can become more important than God’s “yes to humans.”

I think we are sometimes at risk of “taking control” even of our relationship with God and imposing control on others – in the name of voluntary commitment – forgetting that God is the creator of all that is, and Jesus is the head of our life and our community life! There is so much humility in that posture – humility which helps us be responsive!

Story of Baptism: I got a message from the Bethel Oromo congregation wondering if we could host a baptism. I foolishly said yes – instantly! Foolishly because we don’t have a tank, and I knew it needed to be immersion. I found a tank to borrow, but it was so huge and clumsy.... I heard some use an inflatable swimming pool... but there were none left in the stores in late August. The day came, and God who is good – all the time! led us to the North Saskatchewan River for the baptism of 5 young people ages 10-18. I remember Mezgebu acknowledging that 10 years old is young – but why question God, is basically what he said. This young girl was ready!!! I see in this story an invitation to make room for variations on “voluntary”!

Can we confess that sometimes we set human-made faith boundaries and limit the possibilities that come from a God who knows infinitely more about the human heart than we do?

2. “The Anabaptist courage expressed as non-conformity has sometimes led to an arrogant self-righteousness, to a notorious tendency to divisiveness, or to a “retreat from the world” into pious ghettos.”

When non-conformity becomes our goal, rather than a natural outcome of full discipleship to Jesus --- our human arrogance shows through. I think there are many stories we might share about this.... but I will choose More-with less – living and cooking; and volunteerism as two markers non-conformity in my North American lifetime. More-with-Less thinking was born out of an expression of discipleship in many ways: care for the earth, care for stewardship of food and consumption in general. But in me, anyway, this can easily turn to judgment when this becomes the goal rather than a tool in our toolbox. We might judge – arrogantly and self-righteously -- things as extravagant and worldly – even as wasteful! One thing my inter-cultural experiences have taught me is how to live into the extravagance of the great give-aways Jesus was part of! Think of the wedding parties Jesus attended! Wine and daebke dancing were part of this I’m sure! My inter-cultural experiences (that includes you, Holyrooders) often remind me of the beauty of free and extravagant community feasting and dancing! Can we put aside judgment and enter into joyful living that includes extravagant give-aways now and then?

In the wake of Alternative Service during World War II and following, volunteerism has shaped our North American Mennonite communities so very much. --. But our volunteerism runs the risk of being no more than a temporary feel-good experience , and even misguided saviourism. And yet – Jesus commands us to care for our neighbour! I’m wondering if we can transition from volunteering to “help” -- to “showing up for and with each other.” Again, in my bridgebuilding work, this is what I am hearing. “Helping” is not always helpful. But showing up to learn and relate and change things together – that is where reconciliation for justice lives. Is God calling us to “show up” in new ways?

3. “The Anabaptist emphasis on the “fruit of repentance” has occasionally meant an elitist attitude, debilitating forms of works-righteousness, or ungracious expressions of legalism”

Do we limit the gifts of the Spirit in our desire to bear fruit of repentance? The Fruit of repentance is not ours to name or celebrate! It is the result of – not the goal of our penitent and purified heart! My Aunt Sylvia was an artist, a poet, a mystic – with very little physical strength. She identified with Mary, in a Mennonite Martha world... She often felt invisible. And yet, I knew I was remembered every night – as were countless others – in her candle lighting ritual of prayer. She sat at the feet of Jesus, alongside others who cooked and built and planted and preached and taught for the sake of God’s Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven!

4. “The High moral and ethical expectations of the Anabaptists have occasionally fostered dishonesty and hypocrisy, ungracious and debilitating forms of self-deception or denial of one’s own failures and shortcomings.”

Do we have trouble admitting we have fallen short? Do we use high moral and ethical expectations to actually marginalize some among us? We know all too well how Jesus engaged with and loved the marginalized – including people outside his own culture! God created diversity and it is good. God doesn’t marginalize! Marginalizing is a human sin. And yet, we need to bring each other along in love and forbearance – with patience so that our inclusion is genuine and emotionally and culturally safe. Meanwhile, those on the margins are hurting..... Lord have mercy. With God’s guidance, I trust that collectively, we will continue to find ways to share the good news of God’s inclusive blessing for all. As for our skeletons – I came to Canada in 1999, and so am still considering how to engage with skeletons in the history I am joining. But I would like to share with you a skeleton from my family history that I hope will encourage us especially as we engage with Indigenous Relations. My father was born in Lenape Land – Bucks County of Eastern Pennsylvania. John Ruth, a beloved Mennonite historian, has written extensively on Eastern Pennsylvania and Ontario Mennonite history. A book in our Holyrood Library is entitled “Maintaining the Right Fellowship.” John Ruth is now in his 90s, but

during the last decade he began working on what I consider to be a bit of a historical confession on his part. Whereas all of his other books centered Mennonites and perhaps mentioned in passing the Indigenous presence and foundation of this land, his most recent book, entitled “This very ground, this Crooked Affair” shows us a new way of doing history. In this book, John Ruth centers the Lenape people and history, and integrates the Mennonite presence into that. It is a detailed and honest history, and I would propose we, in Alberta can be inspired by John Ruth’s work as we embark in our Indigenous Relations work together.

5. “The Anabaptist readiness to suffer has sometimes led to bitterness toward government and society, and it occasionally finds expression in attitudes of fear, melancholy and timidity.”

For centuries we have held martyrs as perfect examples of discipleship. As Jesus taught, following him comes first – that must always be the goal – at whatever the cost. Martyrdom is not the goal or litmus test of discipleship! Instead, we are invited to follow Jesus on the path to liberation and salvation for all – and God will take us where we are meant to go!

6. “The Anabaptist emphasis on the local congregation and its uncompromising grasp on the truth of Scripture have sometimes led to a narrow perspective on the larger totality of the church of Jesus Christ.”

In my bridgebuilding work in interfaith spaces, I so often hear --- we want to walk together with you Mennonites! We value your Mennonite perspective and welcome your contribution and solidarity! I have been invited by Palestinians and Uyghyurs and “Justice for All” Pakistanis to join them in their struggles for social justice. When I show up and am so warmly received, I feel honoured, but also feel some sorrow because so few seem willing to say “yes” so such invitations.

For last year's Remembrance Day, Edmonton Quakers and Mennonites joined together to offer our community a collective opportunity to lament and pray together. People from many different traditions joined us that day, some wanting to help plan a future gathering.

We confess we are not always willing -- we hesitate to say "yes" when invited to join hands with others -- in unity of purpose rooted in faith. Lord, help us live into the resurrection zeal of joining people from different traditions to live into the Peace of Christ together!

These are some of the cautions linked to our Anabaptist treasured principles -- as identified by Hanspeter. In our process of consideration and confessing, we are invited to strengthen and discard the components of the treasures that have sustained us over the centuries! The parable of the talents, in Matthew 25 reinforces the invitation to consider: what "about" these convictions have been entrusted to us as a treasure from our histories? And what "about" these should we toss? In other words -- are there ways that we do things that do not fall under the Lordship of Christ? This question is inviting us to consider our cultural ways!

I remember a meeting with the South Sudanese community here in Calgary a few years ago. In this meeting, Reuben shared how Biblical principles, especially understood through the lens of Anabaptism, guide a transplanted ethno-cultural community -- like the South Sudanese -- in figuring out what to keep and what to toss when it comes to cultural ways. Reuben, in the process of guiding his community in joining Mennonite Church Alberta -- has done the work of considering the treasures that matter and those that derail! What a beautiful testament to the spirit of Matthew 25. Samuel Gibson -- from Holyrood preached recently on the Sermon on the Mount and called his sermon: "What does the Bible say?". He put the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, and "cultural Liberian traditions" side by side. Traditions are good, and even necessary, he said -- as long as they are in service for what the bible teaches. Traditions keep us strong as families and communities, he said!



But when we see that a tradition goes counter to the wisdom of Jesus, when a tradition harms or excludes the poor in spirit, the meek, women, --- then we must confess, consider and discard or change the tradition!

Our newer churches have done this work of considering what to keep and what to toss. For those of us who swim in the waters of a majority culture – are we willing to do this work too? As we move more and more into awareness of the diversity in our congregations – in all of its myriad expressions down to the individual -- are we prepared to consider the “how” of what we do – and put this alongside the “biblical why” of what we do to discern and adapt well to each other?

We have examined the potential for out-of-balance expression of our treasures. I would like to end by embracing our treasures with the Zeal required for our present day: a day that presents me – at least -- with many challenges when it comes to responding as disciples of Jesus!

I have four thoughts:

1. Mennonites have a history and culture of feeling part of a collective which pushes back against the toxic individualism of our day. Many cultures in our world resonate with this. It feels familiar and good, and it is, of course Biblical! The experience of the Children of Israel in their wandering and longing to settle -- was collective. They wandered, sinned, confessed and got back onto the path collectively! The experience of the disciples and the women accompanying Jesus was collective. They learned, puzzled, grieved, testified and rejoiced collectively! The early church grew in the collective. Faith is personal, but for us, is lived out collectively. Let us be intentional – inter-culturally -- about living into the “we” of our faith together. Praise be to God!

2. Practice of being relational or relationship-focused for true reconciliation: In our church tradition, I believe, we strive to be relational rather than transactional in our relationships with each other. Transactional relationships are all about exchanging services: I’ll do this for you in exchange for this. Jesus shows us how to relate --- not transactionally, but from the starting point of “your faith has made

you whole!” Hallelujah! We start with noticing the light of Christ, the faith spark in the other. – alive in the stories we tell and listen to. Let us embrace relationships rooted in grace and forgiveness – where love truly flourishes. Praise be to God!

3. Nurturing empathy, trust and forbearance in an ever-growing context of distrust and division in our society. These are the foundations of biblical reconciliation. Our Lord Jesus teaches us how to do this so clearly – in the parable of the Good Samaritan, for example. When we hear stories of harm, and we dismiss this harm as “too complicated” -- we abdicate our responsibility to invite the Wisdom of God in Christ to guide our response. We, in Mennonite church Canada, have chosen forbearance with each other as we navigate our stories of harm with the goal of inclusion and solidarity. Let us nurture this in our current climate!

4. We strive for a trust in a God who provides extravagantly for all: We have tended to have an abundance mindset – where doing the right thing comes before all – even finances! In our broader culture, we are moving ever more into scarcity thinking. Jesus teaches us otherwise! Let us continue to believe God will multiply rather than limit as we practice a stewardship of abundance.

The Courage to be in and of God --- together – leads to “doing together” as true disciples of Jesus -- in spite of ourselves – not through our own power. This “doing together” -- under God – is the Jesus way of being a “light to the nations” so that God’s kingdom and will be done on earth as it is in heaven!

May our next 500 years continue to offer stories that capture our zeal, even as we confess, and glorify the love and abundant care of Creator through the life-giving teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ – which we have signed on to follow, come what may.

I would like to close with a prayer from the 17<sup>th</sup> century “Prayer Book for Earnest Christians” translated into English in 1997 (pp 37-38). It has echoes of the humble Pietism that shaped my Swiss grandfather pastor. Prayer for the Forgiveness of sin. Let us pray:

We ask you, O holy Father of all mercies! graciously show us your mercy throughout the whole of our lives, throughout the whole of our lives, and especially also right now, in these last and dangerous times. Forgive us all our sins and transgressions, both hidden and public, committed knowingly and unknowingly.

Oh, pardon and forgive us for everything we have done against you, however we have sinned, whether it happened with or without our awareness, with words or with actions, secretly or openly, against our better judgment and conscience, against your law, and against your holy gospel. So we ask quite humbly and from our hearts, oh! be gracious and merciful to us, O holy Father! for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen! (*translated into English by Leonard Gross*)