



## **LIVING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IN TODAY'S WORLD:**

### **ADVENTISTS AND MENNONITES IN CONVERSATION, 2011-2012**

In 2011 and 2012, representatives of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists and of the Mennonite World Conference met together for official conversations. In many respects the meetings proved to be a journey of mutual discovery.

#### **Background**

Mennonites and Adventists have had frequent contacts during the past forty years, particularly through their participation in the annual meetings of the secretaries of Christian World Communions. These periodic encounters, along with other contacts, gradually led to the conviction on both sides that an official conversation might be both instructive and valuable.

Adventists and Mennonites have distinct identities that are critically important to them. From the outset of discussions leading to the conversation, it was understood that organic union was not the objective. Rather, the dialogue would provide an opportunity for learning about each other's history, beliefs and values, clarifying misunderstandings, and removing stereotypes. Out of the discussion, therefore, might emerge areas where Mennonites and Adventists can join forces in selected areas of mutual concern.

The two communions, viewed superficially, might appear to have little in common.

#### **Mennonites**

The history of Mennonites stretches back 500 years, that of the Adventists' only about 160 years. Mennonites arose out of the religious ferment of the sixteenth century, Adventists out of the Second Great Awakening in the United States in the 1830s and 1840s.

Consideration of the Reformation of the sixteenth century customarily focuses on Protestants and Roman Catholics. However, there was a third movement that, while accepting the Protestant emphasis on salvation by grace through faith, had unique teachings. This movement, the Anabaptists, understood the church to be made up of disciples of Jesus who were baptized upon their declaration of wanting to follow Jesus by becoming part of this committed body of Christ. In effect, this challenged infant baptism. The term Anabaptist is a reference to this act of rebaptism (ana, in Greek, means again). Given that church and state were considered as one unit, making membership in the church an option based on personal decision was thus perceived as threatening the authority and unity of the state. The Anabaptists insisted that obedience to Christ take precedence in all circumstances of Christian life, including when it meant disobeying the demands of

the state. Nonviolence, based on the example of Jesus, also became an important characteristic of this movement.

This movement in the Reformation is frequently called “The Radical Reformation.” The Anabaptists were persecuted by both Catholics and Protestants. Since “Anabaptist” was from the beginning a designation of opprobrium, many adopted the term “Mennonite” after the name of Menno Simons, a Dutch leader and writer, who stressed a renewed vision for the church, including the call for followers of Jesus to reject violence and seek peace.

Over the course of the centuries, Mennonites, along with other branches of the Anabaptists, suffered ongoing persecution, including imprisonment and death, because of their beliefs and practices. They frequently found it necessary to uproot and move on, seeking a more tolerant environment. Many eventually migrated to Canada and the United States where they established communities.

In 1925 European Mennonite churches came together to form the Mennonite World Conference (MWC). Today Mennonites are frequently known as a “peace church.” They are active in building congregations as disciples of Jesus - the Prince of Peace, living and promoting reconciliation, mediation, justice and peace in all aspects of life. As a consequence of active missionary and evangelistic engagement over the last century, MWC is presently made up of 101 national churches, in 53 countries, with 1.3 million members.

## **Seventh-day Adventists**

The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed a widespread expectation that Jesus Christ was about to return in person. While the anticipation was global in nature, it reached prominence in the United States under the preaching of Baptist layman, William Miller. From studies of Bible prophecies, especially those in the Book of Daniel, Miller predicted that Jesus would come again around 1843-1844.

Miller's proclamation had huge impact, ranging from enthusiasm to scorn. Eventually the Millerites settled on October 22, 1844 as the date of Jesus' return. When Jesus did not come on that date, they were subjected to ridicule and mocking.

Probably 50,000—100,000 people expected Jesus to come on October 22, 1844. With the failure of their hopes, the Millerites fell into disarray. The movement splintered; many people abandoned belief in Jesus' coming.

Out of this unpromising milieu arose the Seventh-day Adventist Church. A small group of Millerites, perhaps about one hundred people, restudied the prophecies. They concluded that, while they had been wrong in believing that Jesus would come in 1844, they should continue to expect His imminent return without setting a date for the event. To this belief the Adventists also concluded from Bible study that the seventh-day Sabbath should be observed as a day of rest and worship.

In 1860, this small group adopted the name “Seventh-day Adventist.” Three years later it formally organized; its members numbered about 3000. From these small beginnings, the church has grown to a membership of about twenty million in more than two hundred countries. Driven by a strong missionary impulse, it understands its mission to tell the world about “the blessed hope”—the soon return of Jesus.

## **Participants**

The same participants were involved in both conversations. From the MWC they were: Robert Suderman (Canada), Valerie Rempel (United States), Henk Stenvers (The Netherlands), Patricia Urueña (Colombia), Danisa Ndlovu (Zimbabwe), and Tom Yoder Neufeld (Canada).

From the Adventists they were: Bert B. Beach (US/Switzerland), Denis Fortin (US/Canada), John Graz (US/Switzerland), William Johnsson (US/Australia), Peter Landless (US/South Africa), Teresa Reeve (US/Canada).

## **Structure of the Conversation**

The first conversation was held June 28—July 1, 2011, at Seventh-day Adventist world headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, USA; the second, May 27-31, 2012, at the Study and Conference Center Bienenberg, near Basel, Switzerland.

Each day's discussion began and ended with worship, the worship leader alternating between the two communions. The theme, "Living the Christian Life in Today's World," focused both conversations, which were built on papers prepared on selected topics by representatives from each side. These papers, while theological in nature, endeavoured to show the practical outworking in the life of the community.

During the first round of conversation, each group presented an overview of their communion's history. Papers followed on the topics of peace; non-violence and military service; discipleship and non-conformity; health, healing and ecology; and the nature and mission of the church.

In the second dialogue, major papers were presented from each side on eschatology, non-conformity, and hermeneutics. In addition, shorter discussions took up questions raised by each communion prior to the meeting in Bienenberg. Mennonites responded to issues of pacifism, Sabbath, salvation and obedience, personal lifestyle, hermeneutics, and eschatology. Adventists addressed questions of military service, Sabbath, contextualization, justice and discipleship, the role of women in ministry, church discipline, Ellen White, and eschatology.

During the second conversation, participants took time out to visit Swiss sites of significance to each group. They visited the grave of John Nevins Andrews, the Adventist Church's first missionary, and the first Adventist church constructed outside America—a simple wooden structure dedicated by Ellen White. From there they travelled to a Mennonite farming community on the plateau high above the town of Tramelan, Switzerland (Mennonites were initially not permitted to settle in the valley). Participants heard a lecture on the history of the community, visited its archives, and were welcomed to a fellowship meal.

## **Features in Common**

Participants in the conversation quickly realized that they have much in common. They share a desire to recover the authenticity and passion of the New Testament church, a similar understanding of Christian history, and a strong commitment to be followers of Jesus in their personal lives and in their corporate witness to the world. Each communion brought to the conversation a deep experience of what it means to live the Christian faith, often as a minority voice in the world, and stressed the importance of discipleship and the practical living out of the Christian life. Together they understand that Christians live "in the world" but are not "of the world."

Areas of different understandings were also discussed in order to understand each other better. These areas include: the day on which the Sabbath is celebrated, eschatology, the status given to the writings of Ellen G. White by the Adventist church, the ministry of Jesus in the heavenly sanctuary, and the state of the dead.

Areas of resonance in belief and practice are:

1. The centrality of Jesus.
2. Relation to the state:  
As Christians we seek to live as responsible citizens, but we place obedience to God above obedience to the state.
3. Peace and non-violence:  
Both communions understand Jesus' teachings and example to reject the use of violence, even in military situations, realizing that the consequences may mean suffering and death, as they also did for our Lord. It was acknowledged, however, that this emphasis is not uniformly practiced.
4. Ordinances:  
Both communions teach and practice baptism of believers, not infants; they have a non-sacramental view of the Lord's Supper, and have a history of the practice of footwashing as an expression of humility and service to each other.
5. Ministry to humanity:  
Mennonites and Adventists are strongly committed to helping humanity. Mennonites stress peace and justice initiatives, community development and relief in disasters, while Adventists focus on health and healing through a large network of hospitals and clinics, as well as public health; they also operate agencies for relief and development, and advocate for religious freedom throughout the world.

### **Learning from One Another**

Mennonites listed the following areas where the conversation with Adventists challenges them to growth and development:

1. A more robust commitment to observing the intentions of Sabbath that is part of Anabaptist/Mennonite heritage of celebrating Sunday as a day of rest and worship.
2. More attention to the importance of health and physical healing as integral parts of discipleship and God's intentions for his people.
3. Emphasizing a stronger sense of hope, confidence, and anticipation in the assured coming of God's reign in the world.
4. Exploring more deeply issues of religious freedom and Christian commitment to advocating for freedom of religious thought and practice where these are not present.
5. Focus more attention on theological formation and leadership development for the needs of the communion.

6. Learning together how a diverse global church can be nourished and strengthened at local, national, and international levels.

For Adventists the corresponding list for growth and development resulting from the conversation with Mennonites was:

1. Addressing the dilution of the church's historic stand concerning non-combatancy as an alternative to military service.
2. Strengthening theological education to ensure vibrancy of the church's ministry and service.
3. Keeping Christ central in witness, theology, and praxis.
4. Defending Christians and other religious minorities against persecution and discrimination.
5. More intentionally tying hermeneutics to practical Christian living.

### **Recommendations**

Participants in the conversation offer the following recommendations to their respective authorizing bodies:

1. Continue contacts between our two communions.
2. Each authorizing body consider how to disseminate papers presented in the conversation.
3. Explore possibilities of cooperating together in joint endeavours such as the promotion of religious liberty and the promotion of non-violent approaches to social issues.
4. Explore ways to work together in areas of health and social justice.
5. Explore ways to cooperate in Seminary education.

### **Concluding Remarks**

These encounters between brothers and sisters of two global Christian communions were formally designated as “conversations.” In fact, they became much more than that. The conversations have been remarkable and palpable evidence of the truth of the Apostle Peter’s teaching, when he says that each has received gifts (charisma) flowing out of the “manifold” (poikilos) grace (charitos) or graciousness of God (I Peter 4:10). Truly, the gifts and the graciousness of God are manifold: varied and diverse. And yet they flow from the same God and for the same intentions of God. More than conversations, these encounters have reminded us that God is active in human history, and that God’s patience will not be exhausted by human frailty and failures. The conversations encourage us because of the unity we have in foundational understandings even while we identify the diversity in other understandings. These conversations have been testimony to the critical role of historical context in shaping values, beliefs, and ethics, but in each case they have been founded on the sincere desire to affirm the authority of scripture and the centrality of Jesus Christ for faith and practice. They have been an opportunity to acknowledge the need for humility as we have vulnerably and

transparently tested each other in the ways we perceive ourselves and in ways that we may be perceived by others.

While organizational and structural unity was not the goal of these conversations, we have achieved a deeper sense of the unity of the Body of Christ, woven together with “sinews” of peace (Ephesians 4:3, 16). This unity is not something we are called to create: God has already done that for us. But it is something we are called to “maintain,” to guard, and to preserve (Ephesians 4:3), so that we may truly say with the Apostle:

*“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4:4-6).*

May it be so; to God be the glory.