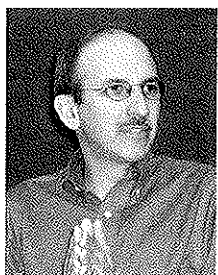


Relating as siblings



Seminary professor Mark D. Baker considers the "give" and "get" privileges of being a global MB church, as he experienced them in Panama, the Philippines and Paraguay.

In the past, Canadian and American Mennonite Brethren commonly related to MBs in the rest of the world in a parental way. Now, we seek to relate to MBs in other parts of the world as siblings with whom we have interdependent relationships. But how do we do this as individuals, local congregations and conferences?

I invite you to think about that question through the lens of my experience as an individual visiting MB churches in three countries.

Yavisa, Panama is the literal end of the road for our side of the Americas. I travelled there by plane and then by bus for 10 hours on a dirt road. My students arrived in dugout canoes from villages along the jungle rivers. I brought expertise in theology and sought to help them think about the importance of theological themes in their context. In addition to sharing

their food with me these Mennonite Brethren women and men introduced me to their culture and history.

Five hundred years ago Spanish conquistadors took over most of Panama. They killed, raped and intermarried with the native people. Their descendants rule the country, but in the hills and jungles some of the Wounaan, Embera and Cuna people, and their culture, survived. It is a limited victory; these aboriginal people are discriminated against and looked down upon by the dominant Panamanian society.

One of the church leaders, Amerigo, told me, "The battle is not over." Pointing to his head he said, "Today the battle needs to be fought here. Today it is not Spanish conquistadors, but the commercialization, modernization, and forces of globalization that decimate our forests and seek to

win our minds by turning us into individualistic consumers.”

We can learn from our MB brothers and sisters in Panama as, in our own settings, we seek to resist societal forces counter to the reign of God that battle for our minds and souls.

We have a very new sibling in the Philippines. Through the initiative of MB Mission and Service International (MBMSI) missionary John Culaniban, an MB conference is developing in the Philippines. A few church planters who practise holistic mission among the urban poor in Manila found John’s description of Anabaptist theology compelling. They formed a network, and requested that MBMSI help them learn more about Anabaptism. That request led to my trip to the Philippines last July.

I brought my knowledge of Anabaptism based on personal study and almost 15 years of being a member of Mennonite churches in Honduras and the United States. I had experience teaching about Anabaptism and awareness of resources they could utilize. Like them I am a non-ethnic Mennonite. I could share from personal experience what it is like to be grafted into this tradition.

The Filipino MB leaders’ commitment to holistic church planting is a challenge to me and many of us in North America. I learned from them. They have more than that to offer, however. Both during the official day-long training with about 20 leaders, and during informal conversations over meals or sitting in buses and in the back of jeepneys, they enthusiastically asked question after question about Mennonite Brethren theology and practice. Many of us could benefit from absorbing some of our sibling’s enthusiasm for mining the wealth contained in our rich heritage.

The Filipino MB leaders did not just want to learn about Anabaptism themselves, they wanted non-Mennonites to benefit as well. They set up

and promoted lectures at two seminaries in which I spoke to hundreds of students about our theology. Near the end of my visit we discussed ways they could continue to grow in their understanding and practice of Mennonite Brethren theology. Lito looked at me and stated with conviction, “We hope that the Mennonite Brethren conference in the Philippines will grow—grow in terms of its influence on other evangelical churches.” Lito’s statement is an affirmation: we have something worth sharing. And, it’s a challenge: share it!

If in the Philippines I benefitted from the enthusiasm of youth, in Paraguay I benefitted from the wisdom that comes from decades of experience. Officially the purpose of my two-week trip to Paraguay last May was to teach a course at the Instituto Biblico de Asunción (IBA), the MB university-level school for training pastors. I taught a course on a topic I have expertise in: contextualizing the message of the cross, but from my perspective the main purpose of the trip was to learn about the Mennonite experience in Paraguay, both in Asunción and El Chaco, and to meet church leaders. I was fascinated. I spent the two weeks asking questions. I could easily write pages of reflections on my time there—on insights gained and new questions to think about. I will point to three areas the Paraguayan MB Church has something to offer us.

Our siblings in Paraguay come from three groups that have distinctly different languages, histories and cultures: aboriginal, German-speaking and Latino. People I met reflected wisely on their successes in relating and working together, their mistakes, and their hopes for the future. We can learn a great deal from them as we seek to relate to our diverse global siblings and the ethnic and culturally diverse groups in the North American MB church.

Many readers are aware that a num-

ber of MBs in Paraguay have been invited to serve in positions of significant responsibility in the current government. People I spoke with were neither scandalized, nor euphoric. They see opportunities and risks. We can benefit from what they are learning.

How do we transition from being a parent to being a sibling? Our siblings can help. I deeply appreciated hours of conversation with Hartwig Eitzen, a Paraguayan MB missiologist, who has done research on that question both from the perspective of “parent” (the German-speaking Paraguayan church’s mission efforts with their aboriginal neighbours) and the perspective of a “child” (the MB church in Paraguay’s relationship with MBMSI).

We can learn from our MB brothers and sisters in Panama as we seek to resist societal forces counter to the reign of God.

How do we relate to the global Mennonite Brethren Church? My experience points to recognizing we have things to offer, but also that our siblings have much to offer us. These gifts go beyond the sort of specific skills, knowledge and insights I have listed above. In each of these places I embraced and was embraced, I affirmed and encouraged and was affirmed and encouraged, I prayed for and was prayed for. Having siblings is a rich opportunity and privilege.

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