MWC deals with divisive issues

IN THE SPRING OF 1936, the fledgling Mennonite World Conference was at a crossroads. On two previous occasions— in 1925 and 1930—leaders of Mennonite churches in Europe and a few representatives from North America had gathered to explore common interests and coordinate relief efforts in South Russia. The results of those gatherings had been very positive. Despite significant differences, diverse groups of Mennonites recognized a shared heritage and the power of collaboration in a common witness. Now, however, the winds of war were threatening to tear the communion apart. In 1936, the majority of Mennonites in the world were strongly linked to Germany, the German language and culture. So when Hitler was elected to office in 1933 and soon thereafter seized complete power, most German Mennonites were drawn into the militant rhetoric of National Socialism and blind obedience to the emerging fascist German state.

In the late 1930s, the majority of Dutch and French Mennonites were no longer pacifists but ardently opposed the threat of National Socialism. Tensions among the participants at the 1936 MWC Assembly in Amsterdam were palpable.

The world war that followed strained the bonds of fellowship within MWC almost to the breaking point. But in the end, the fabric of community refused to tear. Indeed, at the next MWC assembly in 1948, German leaders publically asked for forgiveness for their complicity in the war.

Since then, MWC—like every other gathering of Mennonites around the world—has faced a host of other potentially divisive questions. Today, the 107 member groups that make up MWC differ, sometimes deeply, on divorce and remarriage, the ordination of women and on questions related to polygamy, nonresistance, mode of baptism,

Conversations around potentially divisive issues will continue.

the exercise of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, prosperity gospel and understandings of atonement. In recent years, one of the most divisive currents in MWC circles has been the introduction of neo-Reformed theology—an approach to faith, mostly imported from North America, that thrives on disputation, draws sharp lines of orthodoxy and is quick to declare all those who fall on the wrong side of the line to be heretics. In a similar way, differences around issues of sexuality also threaten to divide the body.

Part of the genius of MWC is its commitment to patient discernment on these issues. It took nearly 20 years to develop the MWC Shared Convictions. Along the way, most groups, despite their differences, have refrained from imposing purity tests on other members, acknowledging the reality of cultural differences and the variety

of church polities represented within the organization.

In 2016, the Executive Committee of MWC asked the Faith and Life Commission to develop a set of guidelines to help member churches discuss "controversial issues." At the 2018 General Council gathering in Kenya, it became clear that representatives were not going to reach a consensus on the ground rules for discussion; more significantly, it became clear that member churches did not see MWC as a space for debating "controversial" issues, particularly since MWC has never understood itself to be a disciplinary body. This past spring, the MWC Executive Committee formally withdrew the proposal.

Clearly, conversations around potentially divisive issues will continue. But it may be wiser for these exchanges to happen over coffee and around the dinner table than formalizing a "process" that will force some groups to defend themselves and others to draw lines. Until now, MWC member churches have generally had a high level of respect for each other's differences. Is it possible that in some settings the unity of fellowship is a higher value than the impulse to impose uniformity of belief and practice?

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