

“Called to One Peace: Christian Faith and Political Witness in a Divided Culture”

C. Henry Smith Lecture

John D. Roth, Professor of History (johndr@goshen.edu)

April 5, 2005 – Goshen College Umble Center

As you may know, C. Henry Smith grew up as a farm boy in Illinois; but he had an insatiable hunger and curiosity about the world. He got a college degree in 1905 from the University of Illinois; went on to receive a doctorate in history from my alma mater, The University of Chicago, and then taught at Goshen College for several years before he moved to Bluffton in 1913 where he spent the rest of his life: teaching and writing. And, on the side, he served as the president of a very successful local bank. C. Henry Smith had a passion for connecting the church with the broader world, including the world of politics. So it is appropriate that you hold his memory in the back of your mind as you consider my presentation this evening.

I'd like to begin with two stories to set something of a context for my reflections on “Christian Faith and Political Witness in a Divided Culture.” Sometime late last summer I was traveling by plane to a speaking engagement. I know that people have different styles while traveling, but I enjoy striking up conversations with strangers. And on this odd day I fell into two conversations, back-to-back, that have troubled me ever since.

On the first leg of my journey, I found myself seated next to a young couple from Germany. They were keenly interested in politics, and when they discovered that I was a Mennonite and a pacifist they simply assumed that I would line up with them on a whole range of complaints about American foreign policy and the general stupidity of everything that America was doing in the world.

I found myself holding back. I do have opinions about various political issues. I did not support the decision to go to war in Iraq, but at the same time my commitment to peace is so deeply rooted in my Christian faith, in my understanding of God's reconciling work in the world that it's impossible for me to talk about peace without reference to my Christian convictions.

I quickly discovered, however, that when I began to talk openly of my commitment to Christ, they became very uncomfortable and acted almost embarrassed for me. I could almost hear them thinking: “what a shame; a nice conversation spoiled by someone talking about something that really should be kept private.” Somehow politics was an acceptable topic of conversation. Christian faith was not.

We landed in Atlanta and parted company while I continued on the next leg of my journey. I boarded the plane and then we had a delay, so I pulled out my pocket New Testament and began to read. It wasn't long before a person sat in the aisle seat next to me. I looked up and saw him smiling when he saw my Bible. “It's nice to have fellowship with a fellow believer!” he said.

I agreed and we began to share the basic introductory sorts of things. I told him very casually that I taught history at Goshen College, a Mennonite school in Indiana ... and suddenly, to my astonishment, everything changed. “You Mennonites are pacifists, right?” he asked. “Our country's at war right now. My son is a Marine. And you guys are a bunch of parasites. It just makes me sick.” Then he got up, went to the bathroom and returned to another seat.

Those two encounters, coming so close together, left me deeply troubled. Why should it be embarrassing or inappropriate to speak about faith in the context of politics? And why should fellow Christians be so divided over political issues?

I have one more, quick story that happened not that long afterwards. I had been asked to preach at a Mennonite congregation in the Midwest. It so happened that the Democratic National Convention had just concluded a week or two before. Disputes about the nature of Kerry's military service were swirling in the media. And the general nastiness of the campaign was becoming increasingly evident in op-ed columns, TV ads and e-mail spam.

As I walked toward the church I noticed a small circle of men had gathered in the parking lot around two cars, clearly engaged in a heated discussion. On the bumper of one of the cars a sticker was posted that read "George Bush IS the weapon of mass destruction." The other car had a somewhat smaller sticker that read "W in 2004" against the background of an American flag. The five or six people participating in the debate did not look as if they were going to suddenly start hitting each other, but there was no mistaking the intensity of the exchange.

I won't pretend that I transcribed the conversation, but the fragments I did overhear would probably not surprise you: "I'm so tired of all this Bush-bashing," "I can't believe you actually think ...!" "a stupid war!" "At least he doesn't support baby-killers!" All over the country last year, Americans found themselves deeply divided in the midst of a nasty, often angry, presidential campaign.

Now I know that slogans and half-truths and simplified versions of reality have always been a part of the electoral process. "That's politics," you might say. Yet most analysts are agreed that the 2004 campaign reached a new low – at least in modern memory – in terms of the personal vilification, mudslinging, negative campaigning and outright fabrications on both sides of the race.

What seemed new last fall was not so much the mere fact of diverse political attitudes, but the fervor of the passion, the depth of the antagonism and the growing fundamentalism evident among Christians on both the liberal left and the conservative right. As I traveled in many different congregational settings last year I was troubled by how consistently conversations about faith and politics among Mennonites seemed to have been co-opted by the polarized rhetoric of radio talk show hosts, direct mail campaigns, polemical ads and Web-site bloggers. Although I heard a great deal of talk about "personal faith" and "moral issues," the Mennonites I encountered did not seem to be willing or able to engage political issues in a framework other than the partisan language of the Red/Blue divide.

At the heart of the debate are questions as old as the Republic, yet as current as today's headlines: How should Christian faith find expression in the public square? Should communities be permitted to post the 10 Commandments on public property? What about organized prayer in public schools? Is abortion a matter of individual conscience or a sin that should be prohibited by law? What about gay marriages? What does it mean to my Hindu friends when politicians assure us that they are "born again" Christians who pray before making decisions?

If you think that Christians should be active in the political process, then what form should that politics take? Would Jesus have voted for Bush or Kerry? Is God a supply-side economist or a defender of welfare? Is the church on the side of the rich or the poor? Is our goal to be salt ... the yeast that leavens the loaf? Or are we called, in the words of one Christian leader, to "retake America for God – precinct by precinct, community by community, state by state" in order to establish a truly "holy" nation?

Running through all of these questions, of course, is the timeless call to live "in the world, without being of the world." Christians are "people apart ... chosen unto God"; we take seriously the admonition in Romans 12 to "not be conformed to the world."

Yet at the same time we also know that we are tied into that world in a thousand different ways. Most of us pay taxes; we drive on public highways; we attend public schools; we trust that the water we

drink is safe; we have opinions about health care and poverty and education and crime and abortion and war; and we share the broader insecurities brought on by the threat of terrorism.

I don't think anyone is arguing that Christians should respond to these challenges by simply retreating: by building higher walls or fleeing to the wilderness where life might be simpler. But the alternative of simply entering the fray of partisan electoral politics – shouting to be heard along with 100 other lobbying groups and political action committees – seems to me to be equally dubious.

The argument that I would like to pursue is not which side of the political divide “true Christians” should support (there is enough of that already floating around!). Rather, I want to invite Mennonites on both sides of the political spectrum to “push the reset button” – to reorient ourselves in a way that can actively link our faith to the needs of the world without falling prey to the bitter divisions and antagonisms of the current Red/Blue divide.

My presentation this evening is divided into two parts. I want to begin with a brief description of a deep tension within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition regarding our understanding of the Christian witness to the state, a persistent paradox in our thought and practice that has been accentuated by recent political developments and sets the context for the current conflicts within our church. So the first part is “diagnostic” – how did we get here?

Then I want to outline several specific proposals that might help the Mennonite Church move toward a more unified public witness consistent with our understanding of the Gospel: Now that the immediate passions of the presidential campaign have cooled somewhat, how might we regroup and move forward in a more unified way?

I should say here that I assume from the outset that not all of you will agree with my analysis or my proposals. I do want to make my case as clearly as I can, but I know that people of good will bring different assumptions to this conversation and so I'm eager to hear your questions and alternative perspectives.

Anabaptist Legacy of Ambivalence

From the time of their beginnings in the 16th century, the Mennonite understanding of the state has been deeply ambivalent. Opponents, of course, have described it as contradictory or naïve, but I think the language of “ambivalence” or “paradox” is more appropriate.

[There is, by the way, an enormous body of literature by now on Anabaptist-Mennonite peace theology – it is not my intention this evening to summarize that literature, but rather to highlight certain themes that keep getting repeated. I was reminded of this at a gathering on Peace Theology last summer in Akron, Pa., when J. R. Burkholder – venerable Mennonite peace theologian and ethicist – shook his head at one point and said, “But we addressed all of these questions already way back in the 1950s!!”]

The questions keep getting repeated precisely because we are wrestling with an irreducible equation – a circle that cannot ultimately be squared. The image that sometimes comes to my mind is the south pole of two magnets – the closer they get, the stronger the force to slip past each other.

Let me summarize this ambivalence or tension. On the one hand, the very identity of the Anabaptists and their descendents (Mennonites, Hutterites, Amish) is rooted in a sharp divide – a fundamental separation – between the fallen world and the redeemed, transformed body of believers who make up the “voluntary church.” Those in the Anabaptist tradition are not “born” into faith, but become a Christian as the result of a conscious response to God's forgiveness and grace – baptism underscores the

voluntary nature of that choice. The church that one joins upon baptism is, by its very nature, a counter-cultural social reality. The body of Christ is made visible to the world by its distinctive practices: mutual aid, humility and service, fraternal admonition, love and compassion to all human beings, including the enemy. Because the world is fallen, the church, by definition, is engaged in mission calling those who are still trapped in patterns of sin and violence to leave behind their old ways, to become disciples of Jesus, and members of this new Kingdom.

As a consequence of this, Anabaptist groups have understood the church to be in tension with the state. Because the state is so closely associated with coercion and violence those in the Anabaptist tradition have frequently refused to participate in the police force or military; and they have been hesitant to swear oaths, run for public offices, serve on juries, or identify with the symbols of nationalism in times of war, insisting instead that their primary loyalty was to a defenseless Christ and to the church that shed no blood.

At the same time, however – and here is where things can get confusing! – most Anabaptist groups have also regarded the coercive power of the state, in accordance with Paul’s words in Romans 13, to be “ordained by God” for the purpose of providing order in a fallen world. Since order is better than anarchy and chaos, the state performs a useful function of preserving social order by “punishing the evildoer and protecting the good.” It is not the task of Christians to create or preserve this order, but neither should we undermine the authority of the state; indeed, we are charged in Scripture to respect authorities and to pray for our government leaders

In short, this “non-resistant separatist” tradition assumed that government has a divinely ordained role of preserving order: and that it will likely use violence to do this. Our calling is to be a “light on the hill” – a gathered community, committed to living out the principles of Jesus based on love, nonresistance, compassion – and actively inviting others to join us. As much as possible, we should avoid entanglements with government: we may, at times, seek concessions regarding religious freedom – something like conscientious objection in times of war – but we don’t expect (or demand) that the government live according to the standards of the New Testament. The Schleithem Confession of 1527 captured the tension inherent in this position in a clear and simple way when it described the state as “ordained of God, but outside the perfection of Christ.”

On the surface, it seems like a good formulation. And, indeed, it served Mennonites quite well for several centuries because it both draws a clear distinction between the church and the state (“outside the perfection of Christ”) while also assuring the state and our non-Mennonite neighbors that we don’t look on government as an unmitigated evil (it is, after all, “ordained by God”). But this formulation – “the state is ordained by God, but outside the perfection of Christ” – is also inherently instable.

At a popular level – in the context of backyard barbeques and coffee shop conversations – the logic strikes many people as hypocritical: “YOU wouldn’t serve as policemen carrying revolvers to enforce public order, but you’re grateful that some people do and you probably wouldn’t hesitate to dial 911. Or “YOU wouldn’t serve in the armed forces, but you clearly enjoy the benefits of secure borders that our military guarantees.”

In response to these charges, North American Mennonites have sometimes tried to “finesse” the tension with creative formulations like: we “support the troops but not the war”; or they will tie yellow ribbons visibly in the yard, but not to fly the flag; or we choose to simply remain silent when friends and neighbors give vocal support to current wars.

Over the past 50 years, a growing number of Mennonites have also struggled with the problematic theology of the formulation because it seems to suggest that the “perfection of Christ”

(loving our enemies) is at odds with the will of God (who blesses or ordains violence for the state). Does God really have two different wills or intentions for humanity? One rooted in love of enemy (the primary focus of the Christian) and the other rooted in violence? Must the defenseless, nonresistant church simply remain silent in the face of state-sanctioned violence? Shrug our shoulders in the face of blatant wrongdoing and say “it’s not the business of the church to expect the state to live by Christian standards?”

By the middle of the 20th century, the “nonresistant separatist” position – always unstable in the Anabaptist tradition – had become untenable for some Mennonites, especially those who were young, educated and urban.

From “Nonresistant Separatism” to Activist Engagement

The story of the transition in the Mennonite church from “nonresistant separatism to pacifist activist” has been told many times: mostly positively, in the accounts of historian Perry Bush, ethicist Keith Graber Miller and sociologists Leo Driedger and Don Kraybill; mostly negatively, in Ervin Stutzman’s rhetorical analysis of the shift from “Nonresistance” to “Peace and Justice.” But all accounts are agreed that during the second half of the 20th century, a new, clear voice emerged among Mennonite activists – ready to resolve the tension in favor of “the perfection of Christ” even if it meant calling on the state to renounce violence and to uphold the Christ-like standards of the church. This new generation of political activists found the “separatist” rhetoric of Schleithem to be naïve, if not disingenuous. After all, Mennonites participate fully in the economic, social, cultural and even political life of our communities. We may think of ourselves as a persecuted minority, but the fact is that we have considerable power and as citizens in a democracy we should use every means available to us to speak out on behalf of Christian understandings of peace and justice.

Not surprisingly, the “activist pacifists” were highly critical of government – after all, how could it possibly meet Christ’s standard of perfection? The leading edge of this shift came in the faith-infused, prophetic language of the civil rights movement, and then quickly broadened into a wider array of “justice” issues ranging from an opposition to the war in Vietnam, to advocacy on behalf of the poor, resistance to the nuclear arms race and, since then, protests against all use of military force. Political witness now took the form of protests, petitions, rallies, public prayer vigils and active campaigning for certain politicians, virtually all of whom happened to be Democrats.

Clearly, tensions between this new movement of “pacifist activists” and “nonresistant separatists” had been percolating in Mennonite congregations and communities long before the presidential elections of 2004. But why have these conflicts suddenly become so much more heated and intense in recent years? Let me suggest three reasons, very quickly, for the deepening of the divide in Mennonite congregations.

First, the 2004 election was, of course, the first presidential campaign after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. For the past three years we have been a nation at war: first in Afghanistan and now in Iraq, and it should not surprise us that public debates about this war, and the broader “war on terrorism,” have divided not only the country, but the Mennonite church as well.

In his 1997 study of conflict in the Mennonite church called *Disquiet in the Land*, sociologist Fred Kniss traced patterns of church divisions over a 150-year period and noted that conflicts in the church have always increased during periods of broader national or cultural tension. More than we like to admit, Mennonites on both the Left and the Right reflect the cultural patterns of the society around us.

A second reason for the heightened sense of tension around this past election, I believe, is related to a perception in many congregations – long in formation – that our denominational institutions are controlled largely by those committed to the “pacifist activist” tradition. As American public culture has

become increasingly conservative, the gap between denominational leaders and Mennonites in the “heartland” congregations has grown wider – a tension that plays itself out in increasingly open resistance to denominational representatives or institutions who seem to be advocating on behalf of partisan politics.

To cite only one example: at the most recent church-wide convention in Atlanta, organizers began a session by publicly affirming a petition campaign opposing the war in Iraq; they went on to express support for the World Peace Tax Fund legislation; and they called on Mennonites to lobby elected officials against U.S. foreign policy in Colombia. But the same session concluded by asking delegates to affirm a statement on abortion that explicitly rejected lobbying government on the grounds that such legislation is “using the government to force others to comply with our Christian standards.”

So at least some of the heightened tension in congregational settings has been fueled by mixed messages from church leadership, which tends to confirm the suspicions that “pacifist activists” are simply lining up predictably with the policies and platform of the Democratic Party.

But the primary reason for the heightened sense of partisan politics within Mennonite congregations has been the virtual collapse of the “nonresistant separatist” position among traditional Mennonites and a dramatic shift among those who had previously been suspicious of politics to a new posture of aggressive political activism. By 2004, the broader transformation in American politics, signaled by the emergence of the so-called Moral Majority in the 1980s, finally caught up with the Mennonite church.

Although Mennonite traditionalists had long been sympathetic to the concerns of the Religious Right, these sympathies were generally tempered by the rhetoric of Mennonite separatism and a theological commitment to nonresistance (in which one could acknowledge state sanctioned violence as a concession to the fallenness of the world without actively supporting it).

What has changed in the past 10 years is a new willingness on the part of mainstream Mennonites – that is, grassroots Mennonites in the heartland churches – to let go of the paradox of “nonresistant separatism” and to adopt the same logic that Mennonite activists on the Left have been pursuing since the 1960s: namely, that faith should find expression in politics; that we are called not only to witness to the fallen world, but to actively seek the redemption of the state; and that we should use all the means available to us in a democratic society (rallies, petitions, protests, bumper stickers, voting, party identification) to bring our moral convictions to bear in the public square.

Like the pacifist activists, Mennonite activists on the Right have not been hesitant to adopt the rhetorical posture of being a small, beleaguered minority, lonely prophetic voices in the secular wilderness courageously confronting the powerful and mighty. But the problem, of course, in all this is that they brought a very different set of moral and religious priorities to the political arena, and they are inclined to resolve the ambivalence of the Schleithem formulation by tilting heavily to the “government is ordained of God” side of the equation.

In the caricatures that have emerged, both sides now tend to regard the other as acculturated and faithless misinterpreters of Scripture and our tradition. Both sides assume that the other has sold out to the partisan politics of the dominant culture. And to a certain degree, both sides would be right in their assessment. But the result has been openly-antagonistic debates, a deepening chasm between local congregations and church-related institutions, and a blurred sense of denominational witness.

That’s the diagnostic, or descriptive, part of my reflections. What are we to do? Is there any way for the church to get out from these deeply entrenched, morally-infused, commitments that seem to mirror the deeper Red/Blue division of our county?

I'd like to respond in the affirmative to that question and offer for your consideration three general suggestions (these are pared down from a much longer list – I don't pretend that they are comprehensive). But I offer them as a way of focusing the conversation, and I offer them out of a deep love for the church.

[Often in the midst of a divorce, the temptation in the congregation is to take sides with one spouse or the other, so that no one is left to speak up for the marriage. My goal in what follows is to “speak up for the marriage.” If you don't like what I'm proposing, know that I will be the first to embrace a better solution if it moves us in the direction of keeping the marriage together.]

1. Take a Five-Year Sabbatical from Party Politics

The first proposal is fairly radical, but it sets the context for the other two suggestions that I want to make this evening: at the initiative of our conference leaders and ministers, Mennonites in the United States should commit themselves to a five-year sabbatical from affiliations with any political party. That is, we should resolve to sit out the next presidential election and to consciously abstain from all literature, Web-sites, organizations and lobbying efforts supported by groups partisan to the Republicans or the Democrats.

Now before you all walk out on me, let me clarify from the outset what I'm NOT saying: I'm not arguing that the church should collectively withdraw from all forms of political engagements, especially on the local level. And I am not advocating a return to the caricature of Mennonites as “the quiet in the land.”

But our increasing readiness to identify ourselves as Republicans and Democrats – as passionate supporters of Bush or Kerry – and our apparent inability to distinguish our political witness from the deeply entrenched Red/Blue divide is an embarrassment to the church.

Choosing to withdraw from party-driven, partisan politics for the next five years has at least three advantages:

1. It offers both sides a conscious “cooling off” period in which we symbolically acknowledge to each other that our identity as brothers and sisters in the church matters more than our identity as supporters of a particular set of government policies.

2. It offers an occasion for a serious, sustained church-wide conversation about the nature of Christian witness in the public square that will challenge us to clarify together our motivations, our goals and the methods that we consider acceptable in pursuit of those goals.

3. And third, it may allow us to develop a shared language for political witness that is rooted clearly and unmistakably within the framework of the Church and our prior, primary allegiance to Jesus and the Gospel.

I don't assume that the result of all this will be complete agreement, but we will be making a public witness for ourselves and to the world that the church – not the Democratic or Republican party – is our most fundamental point of reference.

What might we focus on during this five-year sabbatical? Let me respond with two additional proposals, one rather brief and the other more extended.

2. Develop Spiritual Disciplines to Anchor Our Political Witness in the Context of the Church

During the next five years Mennonites should consciously develop disciplines that will keep our political witness clearly anchored in the church and in the language of our commitment to Christ. I'll give three quick examples of what this might include, but I would be happy to hear other suggestions if you want to offer them.

During the next five years, we should consciously nurture habits that will keep our public witness spiritually grounded. The Gospels tell us that before Jesus began his intense, politically-charged ministry he retreated into the wilderness for 40 days. There in the desert, Jesus faced a series of temptations that forced him to examine his motives. What was really behind the energetic ministry that he was about to start? Was it the thrill of satisfying people's hunger for bread? Was it the power and fame and glory [the kingdoms promised him by the devil]? Was it the ability to amaze the audience with miracles [angels who would dramatically pluck him out of the air]?

If we are going to throw ourselves into the messy, complicated realities of political life, I think we would do well to begin, as Jesus did, by searching our motives, by spending some time in the wilderness, by confronting our temptations head-on, particularly those having to do with power. In prayer we are "reorienting" ourselves around the center of the universe; in prayer we are "putting ourselves in God's hands," with the desire to cultivate a truly God-centered view of the world. Before we engage a broken, bitter and divided world, I would challenge all of us – political activists on the Left and Right – to undergo a conscious and disciplined season of prayer, not to show off our piety, but simply as a means of anticipating the new perspective that comes when our focus is on God rather than on ourselves.

Second, during the next five years, let's focus our primary political witness on initiatives that emerge out of our local congregations and conferences. I understand the structural realities of injustice; I can appreciate the significance of scale promised by legislative action and foreign policy decisions, but too often rallying around the hot-button issues has become a form of political witness "on the cheap." It doesn't really ask much of us. But for the next five years, let's agree to let go of public advocacy on, say, legal definitions of marriage, and instead redouble our efforts to nurture healthy, Christ-centered marriages within the church.

For the next five years, let's agree to let go of public advocacy on poverty, and instead recommit ourselves to the Interfaith Hospitality Network and to standing alongside the real people who have been sleeping in our Sunday school rooms and eating in our fellowship halls.

For the next five years, let's agree to let go of public advocacy on the issue of abortion and instead be resolved to be much clearer about how our congregations are going to support young women faced with the challenges of pregnancy and parenting; and, by all means, we need to do a better job in teaching sex ethics to our young people, especially the responsibilities of young men.

For the next five years, let's agree to let go of political advocacy on foreign policy issues and instead support Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Mission Network and Mennonite World Conference as our primary focus of global engagement, even as we work to establish closer ties with people and congregations of Colombia, Iraq, Vietnam and Indonesia.

A final discipline – at the end of five years, as we move from these local initiatives to broader and more diverse forms of political witness, let us do so animated by a spirit of compassion and love – a love for God, renewed every day by a fresh awareness of God's mercy and grace; a love for the world, strong enough to share the pain of those who suffer, to "stand in the way"; and a love for each other, that is capacious enough to celebrate the rich variety of gifts and passions and experiences that shape the

church's witness to the world. All of this with the goal of grounding our political witness unequivocally in the foundation of the church and the Good News of the Gospel.

3. Get Perspective by Looking Outside Ourselves: Mennonites and Politics in Paraguay

Finally, during our five-year sabbatical we should consciously study, and learn from, the experience of Mennonites in other parts of the world who have also been addressing these same questions. Here, I think the example of Mennonites in Paraguay would make a wonderful place to start that conversation.

In May of 2003 citizens of Paraguay elected a new president. The event was barely noticed by the major news networks here in the United States, but for the Mennonite church in Paraguay, the election of Nicanor Duarte Frutos was a significant event that brought into focus a debate about Christians and politics that has been percolating among Paraguayan Mennonites for some 10 years.

As it turns out, the wife of the newly-elected president (Gloria) was a very active member of a large, Spanish-speaking Mennonite congregation in the capital city of Asunción; and Nicanor himself, although technically still a Catholic, regularly attends the Raices congregation, along with the couple's five children.

In the weeks that followed Nicanor's election, the Mennonite connection to Paraguayan politics became even more visible. By the summer of 2003, for example, Nicanor had persuaded four Mennonites to serve in high-ranking, essentially Cabinet-level, positions in his government. And in the fall of 2003, Nicanor's government resisted pressure from President Bush to send troops and military aid to Iraq; they refused to join "the coalition of the willing." As part of his rationale, Nicanor cited his Christian convictions and the pacifist witness of his wife's congregation.

This past January, I spent eight days in Paraguay engaging in a series of intense conversations with church leaders, politicians and ordinary people about the role of Mennonites in politics. Let me summarize, in very abbreviated form, the outlines of that fascinating story.

In the late 1920s and then again repeatedly in following decades, Mennonite groups moved to Paraguay seeking asylum as religious refugees fleeing the persecution of hostile states (especially Soviet Union). They established colonies in the Chaco: an isolated, dry and barren scrub land in the wilderness, far from any major cities. They faced enormous challenges in the first years: hunger, disease, war, poverty. But gradually, with the help of MCC, some U.S. business leaders, and lots of hard work, the colonies began to generate a surplus.

Today, the Mennonite colonies are a major economic force in Paraguay, producing more than 70 percent of the dairy; almost half of the meat, and 20 percent of soybeans/grain for the entire country. The per capita income of Mennonites in Paraguay is now close to \$12,000 per year compared with the average Paraguayan income of \$1,100 per year.

At the same time, a very interesting political transformation has unfolded in Paraguay. When they first arrived, Paraguay was in the midst of political turmoil. Then in 1954, following a military coup, a man named Alfred Stroessner came to power as a dictator and ruled Paraguay with an iron fist for the next 35 years. Stroessner worked out an interesting, somewhat troubling, deal with the Mennonites. He liked that they were hard working; he recognized that they were good for the Paraguayan economy. And Mennonites, in turn, were appreciative of the order that Stroessner brought – after all, he allowed them to

worship as they pleased. So they kept to themselves and basically stayed out of politics as much as possible, though elsewhere in the country people lived in fear under Stroessner's "reign of terror."

But then in 1989 dramatic changes unfolded. Just as Mennonites were undergoing an industrial revolution – becoming a major economic force in Paraguay – Stroessner was kicked out of power in a bloodless revolution that resulted in a new democratic government. Suddenly, Paraguayan Mennonites were thrust into an entirely new relationship with government: a government that was now based on a constitution (established in 1992), the rule of law and regular elections.

I want to highlight three levels where Mennonites in Paraguay have found their faith intersecting with politics.

1. As the country has opened up politically over the past two decades, Mennonites began moving out of the colonies to the capital of Asunción. Without a lot of theoretical reflection, the Mennonite church in Asunción has established on a very energetic and creative array of social welfare services – faith-based initiatives – that have made a profound impact on some sections of the city. These include second-hand stores, an orphanage and day care center, a Spanish high school, job training programs, counseling services, mental health programs, a truly amazing series of prison reforms and a host of other programs supported entirely by the churches. Clearly, the scope of the problems far exceeds the church's resources, but it's one level of engagement.

2. The democratic reforms of 1992 have also opened up other forms of political participation. Paraguay now has a governing system of provinces that hadn't existed before under the dictatorship. As it turned out, one of the newly-created provinces – Boquerón – happened to coincide with a large portion of the Mennonite colonies in the Chaco region, so that when it came time to elect a governor of the region, Mennonites in the area were an overwhelming majority of the electorate. For the first time, Mennonites found themselves participating in the electoral process.

But with this shift came a host of new and difficult questions: Should Mennonites running for office join existing political parties? Should they form their own "Mennonite" party? Or should they abstain from party politics altogether and run only as "independents"?

Then there was the new issue of conflict within the colonies as various Mennonite candidates began to compete with each other for the vote, appealing to divergent interest groups within the colonies or playing off Mennonites with the non-Mennonite residents of the area.

Overlaid on all of this was the profound problem of corruption. Dictatorships almost always operate on the principles of fear and manipulation. During Stroessner's rule, the government created so many laws – and so many contradictory laws – that it was virtually impossible to do any kind of business in Paraguay without violating a law, so that almost everyone was a "criminal" and therefore beholden to some sort of official who could press the point unless he was paid off. As a consequence, corruption became rampant in Paraguay. In fact, Transparency International currently ranks Paraguay as sixth on a list of 145 countries in terms of being the most corrupt. And at the heart of corruption, of course, is political power and influence.

Is it possible to participate in Paraguayan politics without getting sucked into the corruption that was so deeply entrenched in the system? And what was the role of the church in all this?

Throughout the 1990s, Mennonite churches in Paraguay struggled mightily with these questions. Initially, there was a strong resistance to participation in politics. Then, following the election of the first

Mennonite governor of Boquerón in 1993, resistance diminished and church leaders worked out some basic principles. And now, the idea of Mennonites serving in elected offices seems to be widely accepted.

So that's a second level of active participation: elected office with the intention of representing particular Mennonite interests, and the on-going question of party affiliation and endemic corruption.

3. Finally, as I already noted, the election of Nicanor Duarte Frutos in 2003 brought the conversation to yet another plane. Although he was a member of the Colorado Party – Stroessner's old party which had a reputation for being extremely corrupt – Nicanor was elected on a reform platform publicly committed to rooting out corruption. As part of that effort, he persuaded Mennonites to serve in several key areas of his government: Andreas Neufeld as the head of the IRS, Ernst Bergen as head of commerce, Carlos Walde oversees relations with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund; Carlos Wiens as director of health services. All of them are members of the Mennonite church in Asunción.

I wish I could give you more details of the long interviews I had with each of these officials, but I was struck by several basic similarities in their stories. Each initially resisted the invitation by Nicanor to serve in the Paraguayan government – they were all successful professionals looking after their own interests and Mennonites had never served in these positions before. But Nicanor persisted and wouldn't take no for an answer. And then he made an appeal that clearly got under their skin.

Nicanor's appeal went like this: imagine trying to play soccer on a field that is littered with broken bottles, cement rubble, construction debris. For 50 years that's what politics in Paraguay has been like – it's impossible to participate without getting injured. "We're not asking you all to be players, but up until now, you've just been sitting in the stands, watching from a safe distance. What I'm asking you to do is to get out of your seat and come down and help me clean up the field so that we can play in a safe, decent and fair way."

I was struck in my interviews that each of these Cabinet members had a clear sense that they were serving on behalf of the Paraguayan people – that their involvement in government was not primarily focused on the well-being of Mennonites, but as a service to the broader country. Each asked for counsel from the congregation before accepting the position, and each continues to meet with an "accountability group" of pastors and congregation members on a regular basis. Each of them emphasized that they are ready to resign in a moment if they ever felt forced to compromise their ethics. They are self-consciously not "professional" politicians who are dependent on this job for their livelihood. Perhaps most significantly, none of them has joined the Colorado party, which is a truly astonishing break with tradition since generally these Cabinet-level positions have been understood to be part of the spoils that you distribute among your party friends.

I should say as well, that from all appearances, their work has been successful: tax revenues in the last year have more than doubled (that is, the number of businesses who are playing by the rules is clearly increasing); new terms have been negotiated with IMF and World Bank regarding Paraguay's debts; the country has seen significant improvements in the quality of health care; pension fund issues are being resolved; corruption is being exposed at an entirely new way; and there is a move toward greater transparency.

But at the same time, a number of clear dilemmas or questions continue to persist – at least for me. Politicians in Paraguay – especially those fighting corruption – have a lot of enemies! For example, each of these Mennonite officials (and their families) are protected around the clock by fully-armed bodyguards.

None of the people in public office that I interviewed responded very clearly when I asked what distinctively Mennonite or Christian convictions informed their work – all were opposed to corruption, and all wanted to promote the common good, but these are not uniquely Christian virtues. Each also talked about a discipline of devotions and prayer, but they were not very clear about the link between their private piety and the public policies they were promoting.

Each of the people I interviewed spoke of their initial reluctance to serve in political appointed offices, yet as we talked, it became clear that each of them had actually grown quite comfortable in their positions: enthusiastic about what they had accomplished, clearly enjoyed access to power and not above name-dropping. It makes me wonder how easy it would be to let go of the power they now have.

Finally, there is increasing public pressure on President Duarte Frutos – especially by the Catholic Church (which is the huge majority in Paraguay) – to formally declare his religious allegiances. In Paraguay, as in the United States, the president is the commander-in-chief of the military. If Nicanor would ask to join the church and become a Mennonite, how should the congregation respond?

The Mennonite church in the United States would do well to learn more about what is happening in Paraguay, and use the Paraguayan Mennonite experience as a way of exploring our own assumptions about faith and politics in a context that is less likely to make us defensive, and more likely to clarify the principles that we may actually hold in common.

Living Beyond Our Fear

Let me conclude. Behind our white-knuckled focus on the “hot button” issues, behind the passions of the Red/Blue divide, is the reality of fear. We live in a culture dominated by fear. In the past three years, we have spent nearly \$400 billion on anti-terror measures; we have defeated and occupied two countries; we have created a Department of Homeland Security; curtailed immigration; transformed airport security systems. And yet even in the most wealthy and powerful nation on earth, we still live in fear. Every night, the evening news floods us with images of more suicide bombs and the inevitable retaliations, more refugees, more massacres, more self-justifications. We live in a world where hatred breeds more hatred, violence begets more violence – with every side certain that it is fighting a Just War; that its cause is on the side of Truth and Justice.

Closer to home, liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans have defined the future as US or THEM; our goodness vs. their evil; our truth vs. their deception. In the midst of all this, Christians – redeemed by the power of God’s love – are invited to bear witness to a different sort of reality.

In the midst of the pain and division and violence around us, Christians should be holding out to the world a candle of hope. To be sure, the flicker of that candle might seem tiny and insignificant; it may not illuminate all the corners where darkness holds sway. The good news of the gospel offers no promise of political success; there are no guarantees that the Love of Christ will convince tyrants to put down their weapons, or bring an end to suffering or injustice. But by holding up the light, Christians bear witness to the world that the darkness of hatred and division will not prevail, that love is stronger than fear, that allegiance to the body of Christ comes before all other allegiances, and that history is ultimately shaped not by human might nor by power but by the spirit of the living God.

And so this evening, I invite all of you who are followers of Jesus to be shining examples of the transformative power of God’s love. And may the healing of the world begin with the hard, joyful, work of reconciliation in our own congregations and our own church.