

STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL MENNONITE CHURCH

Baptism talks with Catholics and Lutherans

IN JUNE, the Faith and Life Commission of Mennonite World Conference received an unusual document for our consideration. For five years, representatives of MWC, the Catholic Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, and the Lutheran World Federation have engaged in intense three-way talks on baptism. Baptism was a primary source of the conflict among all three groups at the time of the Reformation, and disagreements around baptism have continued to simmer between and within these groups in the 500 years since then. The carefully worded theological language of the 91-page document is not light reading. But even if most of the 2.1 million Anabaptist-Mennonites in the world today do not read the report in its entirety, the careful reflections produced by the talks offer a wonderful opportunity for a more focused and sustained conversation about a practice that goes to the very heart of our identity as a global communion.

Virtually all MWC's 107 member groups agree on two basic points regarding baptism: We do not baptize newborn babies, and the ritual of baptism does not in itself bring about salvation. But these convictions, both stated in the negative, disguise the fact that our convictions, assumptions and practices around baptism vary enormously.

Some of those differences are fairly straightforward: What is the appropriate age of baptism? What is the proper mode of baptism? What kind of catechism, if any, is expected prior to baptism? But

behind each of these questions lurks another set of deeper theological assumptions or commitments that invite closer reflection. What, for example, do we believe about the relationship between baptism and salvation? Church membership? A life of Christian discipleship? How is the Anabaptist-Mennonite emphasis on "choice" related to our understanding of the sovereignty of God or the fact that we are saved by God's grace? If baptism

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is "merely" a symbol, is it all that important? What is implied by the practice of infant dedication?

In the course of the talks, the Catholic and Lutheran representatives expressed several convictions that will likely complicate the stereotypes Mennonites hold regarding these groups. For example, although Catholics and Lutherans practice infant baptism, they both explicitly rejected what they called "indiscriminate baptism"—the role of a believing family and faith community, they said, is a crucial element of baptism. Both affirmed a strong connection between baptism and a life of growing maturity in discipleship in the way of Jesus.

But the study document also makes a request of Anabaptist-Mennonites. For Lutherans and Catholics, baptism marks

the entrance of an infant into the family of God. Thus, when Anabaptist-Mennonite groups "rebatize" newcomers to their congregations who grew up in Lutheran or Catholic families, it seems to imply that they had been nurtured in pagan households—that Mennonites do not regard Lutherans and Catholics as Christians.

Might we consider, they ask, a conversation about our practice of "rebaptism"? Could we accept those individuals into our congregations on the basis of their confession of faith instead of requiring a second baptism? For some MWC groups, that request would be easy to affirm. For others, however, the request seems to challenge the very heart of Anabaptist-Mennonite identity. After all, several thousand Anabaptists gave their lives in the course of the 16th century for their convictions. And it was precisely their understanding of baptism that came to embody the movement and its threat to the established churches.

How important is it for us to agree on baptismal theology and practices? The study report of the Trilateral Dialogue on Baptism will soon be made public. Would your congregation be open to engaging it?



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