

## STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL MENNONITE CHURCH

# Mennonite World Conference evolves

**ON THE EVENING OF** June 13, 1925, a small group of Mennonites—representing six European countries and the United States—gathered for worship in Basel, Switzerland. The official reason for the meeting was to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the Anabaptist movement, but the discussions that followed also focused on coordinating relief efforts for Mennonite refugees in South Russia displaced from their homes by the Bolshevik Revolution and now facing severe famine.

In 1930, the group reconvened in Danzig as the World Relief Conference, and again in 1936 as the General Congress of Mennonites, to share reports from their various church bodies, reflect on their common heritage and collaborate in ongoing relief work. The gatherings, which eventually became known as the Mennonite World Conference (MWC), were not intended to be a formal ecclesial structure. Indeed, the North Americans and several other groups agreed to participate only if it was clear the worship services would not include Communion. But despite a crisis in World War II—when German Mennonites found themselves in armed combat against fellow believers in France and Holland—the concept of MWC steadily gained broader support in the global Anabaptist-Mennonite community.

Today, MWC remains a vibrant and growing organization. At a meeting in April of the MWC General Council in Limuru, Kenya, nearly 270

people representing 107 member groups from nearly 60 countries gathered for four days of exuberant worship, theological reflection, vigorous deliberation and warm table fellowship. Since 2009, MWC's Global Mission Fellowship and Global Anabaptist Service Network have enabled dozens of national church conferences to collaborate in their witness to the world.

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All these initiatives have helped foster a vision of an Anabaptist-Mennonite church transcending the narrow tribalism, political loyalties and national boundaries that are the source of so much discord in the world.

But the General Council meetings in Limuru also raised several significant challenges for the future of MWC.

Many churches in the global South, for example, have expressed the hope that MWC will exercise a stronger ecclesial function. The experience of Pink Menno's presence at the MWC global assembly in Harrisburg, Pa., in 2015 prompted a strong call by some groups for MWC leaders to issue an unequivocal statement against LGBTQ inclusion. Implicit in this expectation is a view of MWC

as a disciplinary body—which has never been part of MWC's mandate.

Meanwhile, even as the forces of globalization are drawing us closer together, a sharpened sense of localism is emerging in some parts of the global Anabaptist family, particularly in North America. Some of this reflects a healthy view of the church as the local congregation, rooted in webs of relationships that are embedded in particular cultural contexts. But there is also a form of localism that reflects the spirit of our age. We are increasingly inclined to regard our congregations or conferences as self-sufficient entities, free from accountability to the larger national church, much less the global church.

For nearly a century, MWC has fostered relationships across geography, culture and confession, reminding us that the church extends beyond our local congregation. We are part of a global movement that has a particular identity, even as that identity continues to be renewed and transformed. MWC is not perfect, and its role continues to evolve.

But as it moves toward its 100th birthday, MWC's gift of nurturing global connections is more important than ever.



**John D. Roth** is professor of history at Goshen (Ind.) College, director of the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism and editor of *Mennonite Quarterly Review*.