

STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL MENNONITE CHURCH

In praise of institutions

AFTER BEING PLACED on hold for the third time in a long and fruitless attempt to resolve a problem with our internet provider, I thought again of all the ways large, faceless institutions frustrate me. To be sure, the recorded voice on the phone prompts was intimate and cheerful, and the smiling faces on the company's countless mail ads suggested that their highest goal was to promote warm and caring relationships. Yet, in truth, there was nothing remotely personal about our relationship. The company wanted my allegiance, they presumed on my time and had no problem accepting my money. But the gap between their public image and what I routinely experienced filled me with cynicism and even disgust.

For many young people in North America today, my reaction to the internet company was not that different from their experience with the church, especially with its institutions. Everywhere, it seems, the institutional church is in retreat. The critique is familiar: Church institutions use the language of community but function like corporations; they claim to be transparent while pandering to the interests of donors; they project an ideal of love but are really driven by the realities of power and self-preservation.

For Anabaptist-Mennonites this suspicion of institutions is not entirely bad news. After all, we have long argued that the church is a movement, not an institution. Its essence is expressed in living communities—in spontaneous,

face-to-face relationships of trust, service, vulnerability, forgiveness and love. The apostle Paul captured this when he described the church with the metaphor of a living body. I affirm all this. We should indeed be suspicious of confusing the church with its institutions or organizations.

Yet we should also be cautious about the cultural pressure to regard all institutions with

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cynicism. At their best, church institutions enable people and groups who are distant from each other to pool their resources in order to more effectively pursue a shared mission. At their best, church institutions concentrate expertise and experience in ways that go beyond what individuals or local congregations could generate on their own. At their best, church institutions invite us to look up from the individualism and localism that is so pervasive in our culture today in order to connect with cultures and contexts that we otherwise might never encounter.

In the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, we would not want to confuse schools, seminaries, social service providers, mission

agencies, relief organizations, camp programs or any other church-related institution with the gifts that can only be found in the intimacy of the local congregations. But the vitality of our congregational life depends heavily on our ability to look beyond the congregation to our larger mission to the local community and, indeed, to the world. And for that we need institutions.

Mennonite World Conference, one of many church institutions, helps Anabaptist-related churches join each other to form a worldwide community of faith for fellowship, worship, service and witness. It does this imperfectly. It is not a substitute for the robust relationships forged in local congregations, and it is not the only way for congregations to connect with the global church. But it serves a remarkable purpose, helping 107 groups and 1.5 million people connect with each other and helping the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition stay in conversation with other Christian groups. It does this with a small staff, a modest budget and little administrative overhead. Like all church institutions, MWC is not above critique; but it serves a mission that is worthy of our ongoing support.



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