

***Winnipeg Mennonite-Catholic Dialogue Report (2000-2007)***  
**to the Mennonite World Conference**  
**and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity**  
September 10, 2007

**A. Introduction**

1. The Winnipeg Mennonite-Catholic Dialogue Group was organized in June, 2000, at the initiative of Helmut Harder and Fr. Luis Melo. At the time, Harder was co-chair of the International Catholic-Mennonite Dialogue (1998-2003), and Fr. Melo was engaged in ecumenical dialogues on the provincial and national levels in Canada. Twelve persons comprised the original group, six Catholics and six Mennonites (See Appendix I). Catholic representatives were drawn from three archdioceses; the Mennonites came from Winnipeg congregations of three church conferences in Manitoba. We met with the approval of local Catholic archbishops and leaders of Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Brethren Church of Canada.

2. At its second meeting (Fall, 2000) the group accepted a statement of purpose that committed us to meet “in the spirit of the international Catholic-Mennonite dialogue taking place at this time (1998-2003) under the theme ‘Toward a Healing of Memories,’ with the intention of seeking understanding and respect for one another’s traditions within the Christian heritage through the exploration of our commonalities and differences as church constituencies, taking into account our histories, our theologies, our patterns of spiritual life, and our practical ministries, so as to discern practical possibilities of common and parallel initiatives in our local setting.”

3. Over the past seven years the group has met with regularity, three times annually for five hours at a time. The co-chairs took responsibility for planning the agenda. A typical agenda included opening and closing prayers, opportunity for each of us to share ecumenical experiences and contacts, designation of a theme for discussion, assigning tasks to participants, and structuring the discussion. At each session we enjoyed a common meal. Discussion of assigned topics was always lively, and the allocated time always seemed too short. Minutes were recorded and distributed after each meeting.

**B. Four Rounds of Dialogue**

4. The twenty-one meetings to date can be grouped into four rounds of dialogue. In the **first round** (2000-02), topics included Baptism, Eucharist/Lord’s Supper, Sin and Salvation, Church and World, and Mission and Service. For each theme, members contributed personal insights and experiences, and shared reflections on assigned theological readings. We also worked through the document, “Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry” (WCC Faith and Order Commission). In September 2002, at the end of the first round of discussion, representatives of the respective church and college communities were invited to hear our report on the dialogue experience to date. The representatives encouraged us to continue the dialogue.

5. The **second round** (2002-04) was built around four themes: the Holy Spirit and Ecumenism (a paper by Helmut Harder), “Dialogue and Proclamation” (a Vatican document), “The Exclusiveness of Jesus Christ” (a paper by George Brunk), and “Reformation History and Ecumenism” (a paper by Brad Gregory). In February 2004 we presented some of our findings at an adult education class gathering at Christ the King Roman Catholic Church. We made a similar presentation at the Summer Ecumenical Institute at Canadian Mennonite University in 2004. Additionally, members of the group made presentations to a number of Mennonite congregations, took part in Bridgefolk conferences at St. John’s University, Collegeville MN, reported on the dialogue to various national and international ecumenical bodies and conferences, provided information about the Winnipeg dialogue in university courses, and wrote and encouraged articles about the dialogue to various publications.

6. The **third round** (2004-06) featured an in-depth discussion of the International Catholic-Mennonite Dialogue Report (2003), *Called Together to be Peacemakers*. The discussion was extended over six meetings from June 2004 through February 2006. At a concluding debriefing session (February 23, 2006) each participant shared impressions and insights gained from the Report and the discussion (See **Appendix 2**).

7. A **fourth round** (2006-07) began with considerable discussion of the future direction of the group. It was decided to spawn four neighbourhood groups throughout the city. In three of these, Mennonite congregations were twinned with neighbouring Catholic parishes. The fourth brought together faculty and staff from Canadian Mennonite University and St. Paul’s College at the University of Manitoba. These neighbourhood groups were scheduled to meet at least four times throughout the winter and spring of 2006-07. Each group followed a format that called for discussion of the international report, *Called Together to be Peacemakers*. Members of the Winnipeg regional group were assigned to organize and lead the local groups, thus providing continuity with the original purpose and spirit of the dialogue.

8. On June 20, 2007 the four neighbourhood and university groups, together with the Winnipeg regional group and representatives of the supporting archdioceses and Mennonite conferences, met for a social gathering with a shared meal (BBQ) followed by a reporting session and ecumenical worship. About 55 persons were present. At the session in CMU’s Great Hall each of the neighbourhood groups reported on its experience. Common sentiments included gratitude for the opportunity to participate in the dialogue, an increased understanding of the faith of the other church, the dispelling of negative images and stereotypes, and the formation of new and deep friendships as the result of listening to each other’s stories. Many registered a fervent wish to continue and broaden the dialogue, and to see it extended to include more church leaders and more members from each community. Many expressed the hope that one day, through prayer and concerted effort, Christians of all denominations might come together in full communion to love and serve the Lord. The evening concluded with a Prayer Service held in CMU’s Laudamus Auditorium.

9. Meanwhile, the original group continued its dialogue as well. Writings discussed included Pope Benedict's recent encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, C.A. Synder's book *From Anabaptist Seed*, and an article by Jeremy M. Bergen, "Problem or Promise: Confessional Martyrs and Mennonite-Catholic Relations." At its forthcoming meeting in October of 2007 we will discuss possible future steps. There is some interest in organizing a Catholic-Mennonite service project and/or planning a series of public ecumenical worship services.

### **C. Summary Observations**

What follows here is a selective summary of significant results of the dialogue:

10. *Forging friendships.* Since genuine friendship and respectful engagement are important factors in healthy ecumenical relations, the Winnipeg Catholic-Mennonite dialogue group provides a significant model for successful inter-church dialogue. Close bonds of friendship and camaraderie have developed over the years among the dialogue members. We have shared deeply with each other; we have provided pastoral support to one another; collegial ties have been forged.

11. *From parallel pathways to common pilgrimage.* It soon became evident that Mennonites and Catholics in Manitoba have an underlying mutual appreciation for each other. Both faith groups arrived in the province at the beginning of its social and economic development. They often settled in the same region of the province, and lived and worked in communities parallel to each other. They had similar interests, especially in agricultural development and in private education. While their church relationships are not close, there has been enough mutual respect for each other to provide a foundation for growth in understanding. Mutual respect and a desire for interdependence were certainly manifest in the dialogue group.

12. *Appreciation for each other's teachings.* The theological dialogue was characterized by a desire to draw near to each other's traditions rather than to distance oneself from each other. If there was critique of the other, it was often soft-spoken. At times the discussion would issue in self-critique, with the admission that "we have something to learn from you." In particular, there was significant growth in understanding when discussion turned to peace theology, to Baptism, or to the Eucharist/Lord's Supper. Discussion of church documents such as the recent papal encyclical *Deus caritas est* and the document *From Anabaptist Seed*, commissioned by Mennonite World Conference, proved mutually edifying. It should be added that we, Mennonite and Catholic representatives, developed a growing appreciation of each other's attention and commitment to Scripture.

13. *Biblical discipleship.* In the course of the dialogue we discovered that in both our traditions, the Scriptures are at the root of our commitment to follow Jesus and to live in accordance with ethical precepts. We affirmed together the Word of God read, proclaimed, taught, preached, celebrated, and lived. Discipleship was mutually affirmed as an outcome of our understanding of the sacraments and ordinances, confession and

discipline, the mission of the church, the meaning of community, and much more.

14. *Witness to society.* We recognized that in our witness to Canadian society each of our churches faces particular challenges. Catholics, coming from an identity within “Christendom,” face the challenge of how to evangelize and remain faithful in the face of disestablishment and marginalization. Mennonites, coming from a background of separation from the state, deal with the challenges of responsibility for the common good of society. Each group has lessons to learn from the other about pitfalls and about faithfulness in this new situation.

15. *Worship styles: common praise.* As we engaged in prayer and worship, it became evident that we had things to learn from each other. For example, Mennonites expressed appreciation for the rich liturgy of Catholic worship, the use of symbols, and prayerful devotion. Catholics appreciated the hymnody of Mennonites, their singing, and their extemporaneous style of prayer and worship. It was noted that Mennonites tend to be informal and spontaneous in their style of worship while Catholics tend to be formal, measured and liturgical. Over time each group developed an appreciation for the other’s style.

16. *Authority and autonomy.* The implications of Catholic church polity built on hierarchical authority compared to a Mennonite polity that relies on congregational autonomy became evident to the dialogue group. At times Mennonites would express a wistful yearning for some integration of the Catholic style, while Catholics would show respect and desire for some aspects of Mennonite polity.

17. *Peace and justice.* Short of Mennonites giving in to the traditional Catholic teaching on Just War or Catholics embracing wholeheartedly the Mennonite position on pacifism, we grew together in our vision of a peaceable world and in our commitment to peace and justice in society.

18. *Reconsidering the sacraments/ordinances.* In our dialogue we often discussed the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist/Lord’s Supper. This included personal testimonials as well as theological discussion. There was a growing appreciation for each other’s understanding and practice of these sacraments. Concerning Baptism, Mennonites appreciated the broadened context of formation in which Infant Baptism was understood. Mennonites also noted the increase of Adult Baptism in Catholic church life. Catholics appreciated the way Mennonites build a relationship between Baptism and responsible discipleship. Catholics also noted the occurrence of sacramental language in Mennonite baptismal theology. With respect to the Eucharist/Lord’s Supper we noted that the commemorative character of the meal is recognized by both traditions, as is the real Presence of Christ at the meal. At the same time we remain divided at the Lord’s table. We certainly need to deepen our mutual understanding of these sacraments to move us toward a recognition of the church’s claim to be “one body and [to affirm] ... one baptism” (Eph 4:4-5).

19. *Sustaining one another in Christian hope.* A significant feature of the dialogue was

the spirit in which members encouraged one another in the face of troubling challenges facing our two churches from time to time. Examples are the sexual abuse of minors by priests and the inadequate response of bishops to the problem. We also regret the hurtful myths that Mennonites and Catholics sometimes perpetuate about each other, while failing to see “the log in [our] own eye” (Matt 7:4). We regret as well recent declarations that, at first glance, give the impression (through the popular media) of discouraging commitment to dialogue among God’s people. In our sojourn together we have sought to take seriously the pastoral word of Scripture: “Bear one another’s burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). The dialogue experience has brought us together under the divine umbrella of Christian hope.

20. *Discerning the future together.* In our conversations we sometimes expressed the conviction that we are one in the body of Christ, even if we are part of different historic traditions. Together we found encouragement in Vatican II’s “Decree on Ecumenism,” (para. 24) which reads in part that “the measures undertaken by the sons of the Catholic Church should develop in conjunction with those of our separated brethren so that no obstacle be put in the ways of divine Providence and no preconceived judgments impair the future inspirations of the Holy Spirit.” As we discern the future into which God is calling us, we recognize that there is a need in both churches – Catholic and Mennonite – to humble ourselves prayerfully on common ground at the foot of the gracious cross of Christ.

## **D. Conclusion**

21. We have received and studied “Called Together to be Peacemakers” with appreciation and we have made efforts to invite a widening circle of Mennonites and Catholics in our region to embrace the fruits of the international dialogue: its call to reconsider history together, to do theology together, to explore the healing of memories, and to be peacemakers. Our dialogue has been about building bridges, about exploring mission together, and about educational possibilities. In this local effort we have sought to take seriously the challenge of the international dialogue as stated in paragraph 206 of its Report: “We commit ourselves to self-examination, dialogue, and interaction that manifest[s] Jesus Christ’s reconciling love, and we encourage our brothers and sisters everywhere to join us in this commitment.”

## **Appendix I**

### **Winnipeg Dialogue Participants**

#### **Catholic participants:**

- Sr. Elaine Baete, SGM (2000-); Director of Campus Ministry, St. Paul’s College, University of Manitoba.
- Dr. Richard Lebrun (2000-); Professor Emeritus, History, St. Paul’s College, University of Manitoba.
- Dr. John Long (2000-); Secular Franciscan; Professor of Education, University of

Manitoba.

- Rev. Dr. Luis Melo, SM, Dialogue Co-chair (2000-); Lecturer, St. Paul's College, University of Manitoba; Director of Ecumenical and Interfaith Affairs, St. Boniface Archdiocese.
- Michael Radcliffe (2000-); Spiritual Director at St. Ignatius Parish; Lawyer.
- Michele Sala Pastora (2000-2004); Director of Pastoral Centre, St. Boniface Archdiocese.
- Lynda Trenholm (2004-); Pastoral Associate, Christ the King Parish and St. Bernadette Parish.

**Mennonite participants:**

- Dr. Irma Fast Dueck (2005-); Professor of Practical Theology, CMU.
- Dr. Adolf Ens (2000-); Professor Emeritus, Church History, CMU.
- Rev. Ardith Frey (2000-2002); Pastor, Evangelical Mennonite Conference.
- Dr. Helmut Harder, Dialogue Co-chair (2000-); former General Secretary, Mennonite Church Canada; Professor Emeritus of Theology, CMU.
- Harold Jantz (2000-); Journalist; former Editor, *Mennonite Brethren Herald* and *ChristianWeek*.
- Henry Loewen (2000-); Educator; former Church Administrator, Mennonite Church Manitoba.
- Elaine Martens Pinto (2000-2005); Hospital Chaplain, St. Boniface Hospital.

## Appendix II

### **Responses to *Called Together to be Peacemakers***

Upon completing the study of *Called Together to be Peacemakers*, participants in the Winnipeg Dialogue group responded to four questions (cf. February 2006 minutes):

Q. 1 - What is your overall impression of the value of the 5-year dialogue?

**Elaine Baete** said she had found it an extremely valuable experience, especially the sharing of different perspectives, also the in-depth re-reading of history and the healing of memories that we lived. She felt that the experience has enriched her ministry at St. Paul's College and her relations with the University of Manitoba Student Union chaplains. **Adolf Ens** indicated that from a personal perspective he had found the dialogue very beneficial, and that from a church perspective he thought it important that leadership from both sides had endorsed the dialogue. How much the effects of the dialogue will pervade our respective congregations remains to be seen. **Richard Lebrun** found the dialogue a wonderfully enriching and fulfilling experience, both in terms of the people he had gotten to know and what he had learned. Particularly since he has retired, opportunities for good discussion and exchange with people he greatly respects are something to be highly treasured. As for learning, his understanding of the Anabaptist tradition has been greatly deepened. Before the dialogue, this understanding had been based only on reading, but now he feels that he has a much better feel for how at least some Mennonites see the world and understand and live their Christian faith. **Irma Fast Dueck**, after noting that she had been a participant for the shortest time, said that she had enjoyed the experience immensely, and that it had changed the way she teaches, and that it had opened her understanding in a number of different ways, especially with respect to reading various documents. **John Long** replied with a long sentence replete with superlatives in which he

said he found it engaging, illuminating, encouraging and challenging. He said that he now thinks differently, and feels he is more open to new possibilities, and more disposed to take risks. **Harold Jantz** said that he had found the experience enjoyable and enriching. It confirmed in his mind the richness of Catholic teaching. He appreciated the people - the human resources - represented in the Catholic spokespeople around the table. He appreciated the faith he sensed in the people around the table - this has not been merely an intellectual exercise - it has been a shared faith in God known to us in Jesus Christ. **Lynda Trenholm** said she found the report rewarding, that she was impressed by its reference to Scripture (especially to John 17:21 "may they all be one"). She now appreciates the sense of faith of all involved; it's no longer merely an intellectual exercise. **Helmut Harder** reflected on the question in the light of his participation in both the international and local dialogues, and indicated that he felt lucky to have been a part of both. Overall, he finds that the dialogues have taken the edge off his "triumphalism" - part of his Anabaptist heritage, especially as derived from Harold S. Bender, who had influenced him during his education. The dialogue experience was something he needed, to help realize that Anabaptism was part of something bigger. **Luis Melo** said that on a personal level he had been pleasantly surprised by how the group had trusted the co-chairs to set agendas. He was proud that this was the only such group in Canada. Referring to Paragraph 28 of "Called Together to be Peacemakers," which speaks of a purification of memories, he reflected that our group had been creating new memories, escaping from the prison of old misunderstandings, being freed for the life of the Holy Spirit in trying to be one. He stressed that the churches today are in a "new" situation: Christendom no longer exists, we are neighbours and family (through intermarriage), and we are all in a situation where "religion" tends to be on the margins of society.

## Q. 2. Which section of the Report caught your attention?

**Helmut** responded first to this question, saying that what most interested him was the section involving reconsideration of our interpretations of history. He thought it very important that this was done so carefully and at an international level. **Richard** indicated that as an historian he too was particularly impressed with how well the report treated historical issues, and that as a Catholic he was most taken by the generally positive and hopeful attitude displayed throughout the document. As someone who has at times been more than a little critical of the attitudes, actions, and lack of action by the Vatican, he was impressed and grateful that this international Catholic-Mennonite Dialogue received so much and such effective support from the folks in Rome. **Elaine** echoed this appreciation for the work of historical interpretation, the "re-reading" of history, and the healing of memories involved in this activity. **Harold** said that what caught his interest was the discussion of the sacraments, and particularly concerning Baptism, for the reason that he had known about Adult Baptism and the testimony that accompanied it as it is now practiced in the Roman Catholic Church. He especially appreciated the historical work that has been done around this issue in recent decades and the way this was reported to us. **Adolf** was particularly taken by paragraphs 53 to 62 of the Report, which deal with the "Constantinian Era," a period of enormous significance for those in the Anabaptist tradition, because it had brought the union of church and state that the Anabaptists repudiated in the sixteenth century. They reacted by demanding complete separation of church and state. Today the Roman Catholic Church no longer supports that union, and Mennonites are coming to appreciate their responsibilities in the larger society. At this point, we need each other. **Luis** referred particularly to paragraph 49 of the Report, which speaks of Mennonites now finding themselves with a growing experience of integration into established society and Catholics increasingly finding themselves in situations of disestablishment. Both have similar questions to answer; we can consider theology together, both *Ad Intra* (the inner life of discipleship) and *Ad Extra* (the outer life of discipleship). With respect to the nature of the Church and with respect to Sacraments and Ordinances, Catholic and Mennonite traditions [...] experience similar zones of "discomfort". **Lynda** was particularly impressed by what the report had to say about "healing of memories," something that she regards as essential before working together for justice becomes possible. **John** said he was particularly taken by paragraphs 205 and 206 of the Report, and especially with the comment that "We commit ourselves to self-examination, dialogue, and interaction that manifest Jesus Christ's reconciling love, and we encourage our brothers and sisters everywhere to join us in this commitment." He finds this statement a ringing call to action. **Irma** was especially impressed with what the Report had to say about sacraments and worship, with a great sense of the workings of God in Baptism and the Eucharist - in contrast to what we do. She also much liked the Report's statements on the nature of the church, with the emphasis on God's initiative to embody Christ in the world. She reflected on

the tensions in flawed congregations, and on how often there can be a gulf between what we say we believe and what we do.

### Q.3 What is your most valuable insight?

**Richard** replied that the most valuable insight he had obtained from our entire five years of dialogue, an insight that was only reinforced by our study of the international report, was an appreciation of how and to what extent Mennonites can experience Christ's presence in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. He said that this had not only deepened his understanding of Mennonite teaching and experience, it had also broadened his understanding of Catholic theology of the Eucharist. **Luis** began by recounting an exchange with another priest on the question of Mennonite teaching and practice with respect to the Eucharist, and in which the other man had said that "Of course, they don't really have a Eucharist." Luis considers it a real gift that our dialogue has led him far away from such assumptions. He has found the experience extremely valuable for its contribution to his understanding of "method." What he has learned from reflecting together on the past, on the key concept of discipleship and how this is lived out both within the community and with respect to those outside the church, he regards as a great gift from the Mennonites. **Helmut** recounted that when he and his fellow Mennonites had first become involved in the international dialogue they had the feeling that they had less "stuff" [insights] to bring to the table than the Catholic participants. He was most impressed with how the Catholics proved eager to "draw out" what the Mennonites regarded as important. He felt that the Catholic participants had been very gracious to their "little group" (thinking in terms of the vast disparity in size between the Roman Catholic Church and the Mennonite group they represented). **Elaine** had been struck by how our ancestors had been prophetic, even though they were unable to deal effectively with certain issues. The Church had been called by Martin Luther and the Anabaptists, but at that time the Church was not ready to listen. Today we are dealing with many other issues in our faith and ecclesial life. **Adolf** went back to the meeting in which our group "reported" to the archbishop and some of the leaders of Mennonite conferences, and expressed his gratitude for the magnanimity with which our work was accepted by these leaders, especially that of the much larger Catholic Church. **John** found most valuable the thought that all that we need to do we can do, because we have proven by our dialogue the possibilities of a prayerful method; we have substantial resources for becoming one. **Harold** thought that what had been most valuable was the opportunity to see our respective positions alongside each other, to see from different directions. He has the conviction that our convergences are more important and much stronger than our differences; the convergences outweigh the differences. We walk in the same direction. **Lynda** found it invaluable to learn to celebrate convergences. That we are called together to be peacemakers is important for the church and the world. **Irma**, like Adolf, liked the idea that the "little" church could talk to the "big" church. She was delighted to be part of the conversation. Her most treasured insight is the realization that reconciliation does not depend on reaching absolute convergence, that we don't have to fix all the differences to achieve some kind of unity. **Helmut** added further reflections on the essential theological themes: the Church as the people of God, the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit; basic agreement on the meaning of Baptism and discipleship, Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, etc. We agree on the basics. **Luis** came back to our shared "high ecclesiology" - in both traditions we believe in the Church, and we appreciate the need to be "exclusive" in certain areas. We also tend to be "uncomfortable" in certain areas, such as recognition of the validity of Baptism, "closed" Eucharistic tables, etc. We can agree about the adjectives.

### Q. 4 Which aspect of the Report reflects a crucial issue for you?

**Harold** thinks that the crucial issue coming out of the Report that needs further discussion is the relationship to the universal body of Christ with a visible institution. **Richard** drew attention to the next to last paragraph of the document, no. 213, where it is stated that "the dialogue members encourage Mennonites and Catholics to engage each other in joint study and cooperative service." Among the areas of possible interaction listed is "mutual engagement in ... peace and justice initiatives." Insofar as the environmental crisis of our time bears directly on issues of social justice and peace, he suggested that an appropriate Christian response to this crisis may be a crucial issue crying out for our joint attention. **Adolf** wonders why people who worship should find themselves misunderstanding each other so seriously. Why is there so much violence between various Muslim sub-groups? **John** referred to paragraph 189 of the

Report and drew our attention to questions 4 and 5, which ask: “How can we meet the challenge of developing common theological perspectives on peace that reflect the diverse voices of men and women from different contexts world-wide?” and “What is the role of the Church in promoting a culture of peace in civil society and in establishing institutions for the practice of non-violence in public life?” He sees responses to these questions as crying needs in the world today. **Elaine** spoke of the need for continued discussion and the work of reconciliation and healing of memories, to study “models of the church” and to achieve further understanding of each other. She also spoke of the need to get to the grassroots level in our respective denominations. **Luis** reflected on what was not said in the Report. He sees room for more reflection on Christology in both traditions. What does it mean to live the Eucharist in the world? What needs to be done to live the commitments of Baptism? What do we mean by saying Jesus is the “Word of God” and the “Bread of Life”?

**Report endorsed and submitted by the Winnipeg Mennonite-Catholic Dialogue Group, September 10, 2007.**

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