

Final Report of the Anglican-Mennonite Dialogue in Canada (2017-2022)

Introduction

With the passing of Resolution A-140 at the 2016 General Synod, the Anglican Church of Canada (ACC) invited Mennonite Church Canada (MC Canada) to enter into an intentional ecumenical dialogue. From the beginning, it was clear that this dialogue did not seek organic union or even full communion at this stage, but rather to adopt a model of engagement known as “receptive ecumenism” – i.e., to strive for what gifts each church might share with the other.

This dialogue came at a challenging time. First, the Coronavirus epidemic broke out during the dialogue’s second year, meaning that all meetings had to shift online. While the dialogue continued, the close interpersonal relationships that might lead to deeper conversations could not develop in this context. Second, Mennonite Church Canada moved into significant structural and organizational change as they decentralized much of the work done at a national level. Third, the Anglican church struggled with the potential divisions created by the debate over same-gender unions. While complex issues, these last two provided much material for discussion in the group.

Membership

Each church appointed a contingent of members to serve on the dialogue according to its own internal processes. The members of the dialogue during this phase were:

Anglican Church of Canada:

CJ Adams
 Elin Goulden
 Meghan Nicholls (*for one year*)
 Scott Sharman (Anglican Church of Canada staff)
 Christopher Trott (Anglican co-chair)
 Rachel Twigg Boyce

Mennonite Church of Canada:

Jeremy Bergen
 Doug Klassen (Mennonite Church Canada staff)
 Willard Metzger (Mennonite Church Canada staff) (*retired from the office*)
 Melissa Miller (Mennonite co-chair)
 Henry Paetkau (Mennonite Church Canada staff) (*replaced by Doug Klassen*)
 Kimberly Penner
 Kerry Saner-Harvey
 Gordon Zerbe

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada observer:

Chris Bishopp

Dates of Meeting

The dialogue was able to meet twice in person:

February 2-3, 2018, at Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo, ON

May 24-26, 2019, at St John's College in Winnipeg, MB

Eleven meetings were held online on the following dates, often including multiple sessions each day:

May 14, 2018

September 13, 2018

March 28, 2019

October 21, 2019

February 10, 2020

May 29-30, 2020

September 21, 2020

January 28, 2021

May 7, 2021

November 5-6, 2021

February 25-26, 2022

Modes of Conversation

Given the specific encouragement by our respective churches that we adopt an approach influenced by the model of "receptive ecumenism," we reviewed what that phrase refers to and how it might look in practice. Receptive ecumenism is about recognizing that seeking unity between Christians and between churches requires "not only an exchange of ideas but an exchange of gifts." This model of ecumenical engagement focuses not so much on the agreement but learning; not uniformity but reconciled diversity; not necessarily an organic union but something moving towards a full communion as distinct churches. Thus, first and foremost, we were attempting to enable Anglicans to be enriched by receiving the unique gifts that the Anabaptist/Mennonite expression of Church has to offer, and to allow Mennonites to do the same by receiving gifts from the Anglican tradition.

Some of the examples of gifts being sought included the following:

-How to be a global church

-How to live with diversity in unity and unity in diversity

-How to allow for "local option" and "conscience clause" as approaches to theological diversity

- How to acknowledge and “lean into” a middle way/ third way
- How to speak to culture from a minority or marginal position as opposed to a position of establishment and power
- How to do mission in a post-Christian culture
- How to be a church that emphasizes the “priesthood of all believers,” the equipping of the laity
- How to create a genuine community in a time when it is so lacking
- New approaches to the interpretation of Scripture
- Different understandings of the work of the Holy Spirit
- Approaches to Indigenous inculturation and sovereignty
- How do we practice Christian peacemaking

As the discussion developed, the dialogue focussed on three core issues:

- 1) Authority within our respective churches
- 2) The relationship of our churches to Indigenous peoples in Canada
- 3) Baptism, discipleship, and membership

The remainder of this report will look at the considerations in each of these areas.

Key Insights

1) Authority

The dialogue began with the assumption that the Anglican Church was episcopally led and synodically governed and thus had a tendency towards hierarchy in its governance. At the same time, the Mennonite churches were congregationally focused and, therefore, much more egalitarian in their governance. Closer examination revealed that the current realities were much more complex.

The Anglican members of the dialogue took some time to explain the diocesan, provincial, and national church organizations of their church and the various levels of governing synods and bishops with a range of responsibilities. The Mennonites responded by explaining their congregational, regional, and national organizations and their respective duties. This was further complicated by the fact that Mennonite Church Canada was currently devolving much of the responsibility of the national church onto regional bodies. At the same time, most Mennonite Church Canada congregations are partners with Mennonite Central Committee, a relief, development, and peace organization that links multiple Mennonite denominations.

From a particular perspective, the levels of structural organization appeared to be quite similar even though the legal and constitutional authority of each of the structures within the respective churches differed. For Anglicans, the increasing emphasis on synodical decisions modified the hierarchical authority of the bishops to bring a more democratic sense to the findings of the church. This sense was severely challenged in the 2019 General Synod when, in the discussions on same-gender unions, failure to achieve a 2/3rds majority by a slim margin in the order of bishops prevented the passage of a resolution which was supported by far higher

than 2/3rds of both the orders of laity and clergy. For members of the dialogue, such struggles laid bare the complexity of authority within the Anglican Church.

For the Mennonite members of the dialogue, the apparent egalitarianism and democratic structures of the church nevertheless were often seen to disguise hidden loci of authority. The Mennonite church continues to struggle with the remnants of patriarchy regarding whose voices are attended to when decisions are made. The ethnic and historical differences between Russian, Swiss, and Amish Mennonites and other groups worldwide also influence the direction of discussion and conclusion. Finally, members of the dialogue pointed out that in their debates over same-gender unions, it had become clear that the governance structures created no spaces for the LGBTQ+ community to express their concerns. On reflection, the Anglican members of the dialogue had to admit that similar power structures continue to influence their decisions as well.

Historically, the differences between the two churches originated from two very different impulses: a radical egalitarianism among the gathered faithful on the one side and a hierarchical, centralized authority on the other. One of our biblical reflections led us to realize that this struggle was built into the founding disputes of the early church. Our respective churches' modern local, national, and international organizations are leading to more convergence than we had realized, with much potential for working together.

2) Indigenous-Settler Relations

The dialogue spent a great deal of time reflecting on the respective Indigenous-Settler relations in the two churches and invited several Indigenous guests to help us with our discussions. This is an area where there is already considerable cooperation between the two churches through joint memberships with various social justice organizations, but where that work does not always touch on the internal structures of the churches themselves.

The dialogue members met with several Indigenous interlocutors over several different meetings, including Elder Velma Orvis (now deceased), Rev. Vincent Solomon, Archbishop Mark MacDonald, and Rev. Adrian Jacobs. These guests each stimulated lively discussions about our respective relations with First Nations and what we might do together ecumenically.

Review of and reflection upon our respective histories led the dialogue to see clear points of convergence and difference. The Anglican Church had a much longer history of colonial involvement with First Nations, including the tragedy of residential schools and suppression of Indigenous spirituality. The Mennonite Churches are not without involvement, though, as they have developed schools and even some residential schools in the 1950s and 1960s among First Nations. This had been mainly in "community development" projects that remained an imposed colonial project, even if more open to First Nations engagement. Both churches agreed that there was much to repent for in their histories.

The Anglicans and the Mennonites had worked together through the various inter-church organizations engaged in Indigenous social issues in the 1970s and 1980s. Most of these have now merged into Kairos. Thus, there had been a long history of cooperation between the churches, even if it was not evident today. There remains a nagging sense for members of the dialogue that such social justice commitments may continue the past colonial relations unless the churches are cautious.

The Mennonite Church continues social justice engagement through offices at the national and regional levels. Indeed, one of the dialogue members, Kerry Saner-Harvey, fills such a position at a regional level. Mennonite Church Canada had one full-time staff person working in Indigenous-Settler relations during the term of the dialogue, and Mennonite Central Committee has national and provincial staff committed to the task.

The Mennonite members of the dialogue recognized that because of mission history, the Anglican church had a much larger number of Indigenous members and, therefore, a greater opportunity to walk together in partnership in seeking to address and repair the wrongs of the colonial past (and present). In 2019 the Anglican Church changed its canons to create a space for Indigenous peoples within the church to create their own governance and ministry structures. This allows for a non-territorial and self-determining jurisdiction within the Anglican Church that brings together Indigenous peoples across the country. It confirms the Sacred Circle as the representative body and the Anglican Council of Indigenous People (ACIP) as its executive body, overseen by an Archbishop. At the time of the dialogue, the Sacred Circle was working on their constitutive “Covenant” and “Way of Life” documents. The hope and prayer of these moves are to create a self-determining Indigenous church within the Anglican Church of Canada.

Such changes challenge the colonial mentality of all members of the dialogue. These events opened up for the dialogue new ways of being church in the modern world and provided challenges for moving forward together. It is clear that this work of decolonization in the churches is deeply interrelated to the ecumenical task.

3) Baptism, Discipleship, Membership

The dialogue members read the *Arusha Call to Discipleship*, the World Council of Churches *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* document, and the Lutheran-Mennonite-Roman Catholic Trilateral Dialogue *Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church*. Along with reflections from Adrian Jacobs on Indigenous perspectives around baptism, these constituted the basis of the discussions.

Dialogue members agreed that they wished to uphold all the various symbols and meanings associated with baptism: washing away of sins, dying and rising in Christ, passing through the Red Sea, public testimony to faith, radical commitment to the Christian life, etc. They recognized that each of our traditions had emphasized these in different ways and at other

times and each of them had certain gifts and strengths. It was also essential to acknowledge the commonalities between the churches.

Historically, one of the most significant manifestations of division between the Anglican and Anabaptist traditions was the baptism of infants within the Anglican tradition and the baptism of believers/adults within the Anabaptist traditions. More than just a debate over ritual practice, this diversity is in many ways an expression of the even deeper differences around the cultural and civil establishment of a church versus the church as an alternative society. However, there have been significant shifts in this regard in both churches in the modern period. For the Anglicans, fewer and fewer people are bringing their children to be baptized, and they are seeing more emphasis on adults taking responsibility for their own baptism. For the Mennonites, many young adults are not choosing baptism, even when they are active participants in church life. There is a disconnect between historical understandings of Anabaptist baptism and its practice today.

These observations shifted the discussion in two directions. The first was to ask questions about the adequacy of both churches' teaching and catechesis of young people. Historically, Anglicans had tried to resolve the problem through the rite of confirmation after sustained education, where young people took on their baptismal vows for themselves. Still, today very few churches continue with that practice. Mennonite churches may have more robust teaching traditions for young unbaptized people, but that tradition has waned in many churches. As noted, young adults are choosing baptism less frequently, and catechism is often considerably briefer and of less depth than in the past. Once again, modernity had resulted in shifts that brought the churches closer together in their practices.

The second direction was to ask the question of the relationship between baptism and membership in the church. This proved to be much more vexing than initially thought. For Mennonites, baptism was the necessary precursor to full membership in a local congregation. While historically, a local congregation may be a distinct community of the faithful gathering at a particular place, this may no longer be the case as people are mobile and choose between congregations in urban areas. In the past, moving from one congregation to another required conscious decisions and recognition by the churches involved; such may no longer be the case. The close linking of baptism with church membership is thus more challenging to sustain, and therefore the meaning of baptism as a rite also begins to shift.

For Anglicans, baptism marked incorporation into the Universal Body of Christ and thus membership in the Church anywhere at any time. The Anglican church is more geographically organized, with parishes defined by geographical boundaries. In theory, at least, this means that anyone within the bounds of a parish was a member of the parish, even if they were not Christian and deserving of care from that parish. This model is more applicable in England, though it has shifted significantly there as well. Like the Mennonites, church members can come from almost anywhere within driving distance in contemporary Canada.

The problem of congregational membership in relationship to baptism has become more acute within the context of the Coronavirus pandemic. The dialogue members had many check-ins and discussions on how the pandemic affected their lives. One of the consequences of moving church services online meant they become available worldwide. One of the joys of the pandemic was the ability to connect over long distances. Mennonite Church Canada invited a different local congregation each week to broadcast their local service across the country, allowing people to participate in the diversity of expressions within the church.

Similarly, for both Anglican and Mennonite churches, shut-ins and people in the hospital could participate in services, as well as former members of congregations and others. What becomes the link between baptism, membership, and participation in a congregation in this context? Traditional models in both churches require rethinking and, in the process, may bring the churches closer together.

Further discussion asked the question of the relationship between baptism and participation in the Eucharist? While most members of the dialogue were willing to affirm the traditional sense that only baptized members of the community should participate in the Eucharist, this was becoming more difficult to maintain, given the circumstances outlined above. Some Anglican members of the dialogue spoke to the sense that the Anglican Church should have an “open table” that did not require congregational membership or evidence of baptism to admit people to the Eucharist. They particularly liked the sense that by grace, God could call people through the invitation of the table into a more significant commitment in baptism. Having said that, though, these members had to recognize that such an understanding was not as widespread within the Anglican Church as the more traditional understanding of baptism preceding participation in the Eucharist.

Mennonites wrestle with less understanding of and commitment to the centrality of baptism and church membership. Historically, baptism, communion and church membership are completely intertwined, and cannot be considered or practiced apart from each other. As a current example of what is changing, children of the church feel like members as they have been informally called such all their lives. They may feel no need to be baptized as an entry marker into the community. Increasingly the table is “open” in Mennonite churches, separating baptism and communion. There is no easy resolution to these ecclesiological questions.

This cycles back to the big question of what discipleship means in the contemporary context. Our reading of the *Arusha Call to Discipleship* challenges the churches to receive the gifts of what was once on the margins as our models for discipleship today. While all members of the dialogue were hesitant about some of the more classic/historical forms of evangelism expressed in the *Arusha Call*, the opening to new meanings of baptism and the Holy Communion/Eucharist showed ways forward that were not anticipated.

Reflection of the Dialogue Members

During the final meeting of the dialogue, members were asked to reflect in a specific way on the gifts which they felt they had personally received through the course of the dialogue. These were recorded online via Zoom and edited into a video presentation. Some of the comments are also reproduced here in writing:

Rachel Twigg Boyce: The biggest gift was a decision made before I joined the group to include Indigenous voices, not just to have a thematic meeting about “Indigenous issues”, but to actually have them come alongside in the dialogue. To have it be in many ways like a three-way conversation. The idea of unsettling the settler did that work for me on a regular basis, reminding me to think about other viewpoints as well.

Gordon Zerbe: The way in which your church and, and you all from the Anglican side have a passion for things ecumenical, which hasn’t always been demonstrated from our vantage point where we’ve just come to terms with being a marginalized, odd duck group, kind of just comfortable with that.

But, you’ve expressed more of the aspirational dimension of what is the Christian thing to be one. Whatever that means. And I’ve really appreciated the passion I’ve sensed from you that this is some small part of that. I’ve also really appreciated and have, I think, gained a little insight, when we could just be listening in as a so-called fly on the wall when all of a sudden, Anglican matters came up and you all started talking about that. The first one when that happened was the discussion whether/what to do with the Eucharist during COVID and can you do it virtually or not? It was just fascinating to hear various solutions to this conundrum early on in our conversation.

CJ Adams: One of the things that I carried in with me was awareness of the deep hurt that many Mennonites have, and especially suspicion of liturgical churches, and the beauty that I found here was there.

And that to me was a gift because I did not want to come in and defend or re-hurt or anything like that. And so, that was an insight that I saw of just letting that go, knowing that with different people, I’ve experienced that, but not with this group.

I acknowledged that was kind of the breadth and the openness that I heard. And though at times I felt that I walked by a different drummer, I think, I think that was good too. And it was accepted, you know? That acceptance was a gift for me.

Chris Bishopp: The gift of your openness and desire to re-vision your relationship with Indigenous people is just a tremendous growing. And to see some discussion about the ways in which both of your churches are engaged in meaningful ways in deepening that relationship

and working to through apology and to open sort of reconciled relationships and envision a new structural pattern is fascinating.

And I think a gift that you have to give to the entirety of the church in Canada goes past a sense of decolonization but speaks of the potential of an indigenization of the church here. I think that's a marvellous thing. I'm very thankful for your openness and honesty in sharing your positions with respect to your churches, warts and all.

Kerry Saner-Harvey: I came to see more clearly how congregationalist we are as Mennonites and the limitations of that. So that's one of the things I noted. Also, as Gord mentioned, the Anglican desire for unity, to be one Christian body, is something that I didn't ever really articulate as valuable coming from a background that valued our sort of Mennonite particularity. It was just not something I would've said.

It's valuable, but I hadn't really thought of it. The idea that denominations could even function in full communion was a new idea to me, but now I can really see the draw to it. And so that's pretty cool. And, of course, there are also challenges to it too. I also certainly appreciated learning about the creation of the Indigenous ecclesiastical province as well and gaining much more nuance on the work toward Indigenous autonomy.

Jeremy Bergen: Some of the hope was that what Mennonites might have to contribute is a kind of perspective on being church that maybe didn't embrace Christendom or has always kind of been marginal. And I think the interesting learning, though, is that, especially as we engage with our own complicity in settler colonialism, I think we Mennonites are much more implicated in the Christendom project than we realize.

Others might look at us perhaps with an established church legacy and might think that we have somehow avoided some of those things. It's not to say that our histories are the same, but I really think that's a very significant learning.

I think the wrestling with Indigenous settler relations is just one of the really key gifts. This process of learning from Indigenous leaders and voices really provides an occasion for that to happen. I'm very, very grateful for all of the contributors that pushed us in that regard and just very concretely.

... And so, as I think, what kind of recommendations might we want to bring out of this? I would want MC Canada to think about what sort of ecumenical presence should be more clearly integrated into our structures. Not only into dialogues, which I hope we continue to do, like these kinds of dedicated dialogues, but into the routine work of the church.

Scott Sharman: I had been told that the idea of ecumenical gift exchange through dialogue was that you don't get to choose your own gifts. I might have started in on this thinking that we

knew which gifts we were going to get and which ones we were going to give as well. So, I'm going to learn about the Mennonite historic peace witness, and Mennonites are going to learn about liturgy. But that's not the way that it goes. You receive the gift that you are given, and your partner discerns a gift to give you and undoubtedly, the Holy Spirit also. And so those gifts emerge organically in real time, not as something that we get to select for ourselves in advance.

I would say trying to choose what I would name as the gift that I think I've received most fully from our Mennonite partners in this conversation... I think if I had to pick one, it's not one that I would have assumed at the outset but would be the modelling of what I would maybe define as a healthy self-examination and self-critical sort of reflection. Maybe that's rooted in this sense of an ongoing reforming impulse.

I would probably have to admit that I might have had a bit of a mythologized view of Mennonites and an idealistic picture of the Anabaptist tradition. And I regularly found it both surprising but also really quite compelling to hear from other Mennonite colleagues in these conversations about how that's not always the case and challenging some of those assumptions or there are some inconsistencies that people don't see on the outside.

Christopher Trott: I came into this dialogue deeply, deeply suspicious of congregation-based churches. My personal experience with congregation-based churches has been that they were very exclusive, that if you weren't a member of the congregation, you couldn't participate in communion. Were you really allowed to participate in whatever liturgy they had? I came into this dialogue very deeply suspicious of that.

I have learned that congregation-based churches, such as the Mennonite Church, are much more complex than I thought. We've talked about authority. We've talked about membership. We've talked about fellowship. All those things are very differently structured, but in a way that I should not feel excluded or exclusive.

Melissa Miller: Anglicans have different relationships with Indigenous peoples in Canada, as compared to Mennonites, and that provided some resources that were different, that could be brought into our conversations.

One of the Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Report is that Christians would recognize the validity of Aboriginal spirituality in its own right. And so, we were able to lift that up over and over again and be instructed by that in this dialogue.

... from the outset, it was clear that Anglicans were a big denomination. Mennonites were a little denomination. That often leads to an imbalance; it's often difficult to be equal partners when there is that size differential. But Anglicans didn't run away with the process and say, "Here's the seven things we know about ecumenical dialogue, so we'll just impose that on this." Space was created for Mennonites to be small and to carry their voice forward and to figure out

together how to proceed. I think some of those early months were frustrating for those of us who like to know where we're going and to explain that to other people. I think it was also essential for Anglicans to do what you did, which was just to make space, let's figure out the gifts we want to exchange. So, it's nice to have a big denomination come alongside and provide the kind of administrative support that Anglicans were able to do. I affirm the way that power has been used.

A non-dominational ethic is at the heart of Mennonites. The Jesus of Philippians is the Jesus who uses his power in extravagant ways and transforms the world. And that's critical to my belief and that's critical to my denomination, even if we don't always figure it out or live it out well.

That model of power is closely linked to Mennonite faith. We ground ourselves in it. It's also good to see another group of Christians exercise power from a significant resource base and from being closer to the centers of power because significant things can happen from that place also.

Recommendations to the Churches:

- 1) Authorize the formation of a joint task group to create an ecumenical relations resource package for both churches, both to share the fruits of this dialogue and to serve as an impetus to inspire more local engagement between Anglican and Mennonite churches in various opportune places.
- 2) Continue to work together as churches as fully as possible in social justice efforts, both in the multilateral church coalitions and councils in Canada and in bilateral partnerships.
 - a. Prioritize working together in the area of Indigenous justice and decolonization, both in the churches and in wider society.
 - b. Consider the invitation of observer members from one another's churches to sit on key committees, commissions, and governing bodies.
- 3) Consider supporting another 3-year mandate for the Anglican-Mennonite Dialogue, specifically focusing on questions of ministry, orders, and congregational shared ministry possibilities.
 - a. Invite and encourage the appointment of Indigenous members from both churches to this phase of the dialogue.
 - b. Expand the inclusion of an ecumenical observer/observers to include other churches with whom there are special connections (Mennonite Brethren, Moravians, etc.)
- 4) Consider the creation of an "Anglican-Mennonite Coordinating Commission" which would bring leaders and staff together once annually to identify and maximize opportunities for missional partnership and cooperation and national and regional levels.