

The Soul of the Conference

Delivered by Iris de León-Hartshorn, PNMC Executive Conference Minister at the Annual Meeting in Anchorage, Alaska on June 24, 2010.

I know I am supposed to speak to the "State of the Conference," but I'd like to reframe it a bit and speak to you about the "Soul of the Conference." One known fact, that many people may not know, is that when Martin Luther King, Jr. started his work, his primary goal was not a civil right movements, but a movement to redeem the soul of America. He felt that the U.S. was not living up to its values as a nation.

In recent years we have had people like Greg Boyd speak to Mennonites about our values and beliefs and the need to treasure them and not to lose them. Which brings back a question over and over in my mind: What is at the core of our soul as Mennonite/Anabaptists? And second: How well are we living it out here in the Pacific Northwest? In Stuart Murray's new book, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith*, he identifies seven core convictions of Anabaptism:

- Jesus is our example, teacher, friend, redeemer and Lord. He is the source of our life, the central reference point for our faith and lifestyle.
- Jesus is the focal point of God's revelation. We are committed to a Jesus-centered approach to the Bible.
- We take a cautious approach to relating to the state.
- We are committed to exploring ways of being good news to the poor, powerless, and persecuted.
- Churches are called to be committed to communities of discipleship and mission, a place of friendship, mutual accountability and multi-voiced worship.
- Spirituality and economics are interconnected.
- Peace is at the heart of gospel.

Are these convictions at the soul of who we are as Mennonite/Anabaptists in the Pacific Northwest? My first ten months have been about visiting leaders within the conference and visiting congregations. I have heard stories of struggle, hope and joy. Within those stories I have found core convictions that at times have not been realized, but a hunger to live them out. Of the seven core convictions I shared above, there are three that stand out for me within our context in the Pacific Northwest. These are not particularly what I think, but what I heard you say these last ten months in worship, meetings and one to one conversations.

The first one is Jesus is our example, teacher, friend, redeemer and Lord. We have a real desire to be disciples of Jesus in every way possible. Two things that have consistently come through as I have visited throughout the conference are to be followers of Jesus and to see Jesus as Lord. I think we get into trouble when we select a specific part of Jesus' life as the only way to follow Jesus. For example, we may see Jesus only as being prophetic or only being a shepherd instead of following all of who Jesus is. We have a tendency to judge each other according to our particular view of Jesus. As Mennonites we need to embrace all of Jesus, even

the parts that make us uncomfortable. We need to extend a little grace to each other as we each struggle to be disciples. As Mennonites in the Pacific Northwest, are we committed to be followers of Jesus? I say wholeheartedly, yes we are.

Second, I have seen congregations and ministries within PNMC committed to bringing good news to the poor, powerless and persecuted. These commitments have taken on various forms depending on the congregation or ministry. I have witnessed congregations within our conference minister to the homeless, those living on the margins, with immigrants who are powerless in a country where they don't yet know the language or customs, and I have seen churches working with those who have been persecuted within our society and around the world. It is clear that not all of us are comfortable with this conviction, but I do see and hear the conviction of many within the conference being called to bring the good news to the poor, powerless and persecuted. My hope is that we can give each other the room to answer the call within our own context.

The third conviction is wanting to be communities of faith that work at discipleship and mission, holding each other accountable and worshiping corporately. There is such a strong desire within our conference to live out this conviction. The idea of community, making decisions together, being accountable to each other and being a worshiping community not only appeals to us, but it seems to be at the very core of who we want to be together. Yet, this is the one conviction we struggle with the most. It's though we have a love/hate relationship with this conviction. We want to be community as long as it doesn't interfere with our personal life, we want to hold others accountable but not ourselves, and we want to worship together only if it's the style of worship we appreciate. This conviction has probably been battered more by our modern day culture than any other. It's hard to be community in a society that highly values individualism, yet at our core we know that we want to be community.

I am delighted to be part of a conference that holds these convictions and much more. I appreciate the work of pastors, leaders and congregations in their day to day living out their faith. Part of our Christian journey is to grow and I want to grow with you and commit myself to this journey with you.

I am committed to following Jesus and acknowledging him as Redeemer and Lord. I will seek God's guidance in being a follower of Jesus holistically and not put one aspect of Jesus' life over another.

I am committed to exploring ways of being good news to the poor, powerless and persecuted in my life and I will walk along side you as you do the same, so that we might be a witness of God's reconciling love for the world.

I am committed to being in community and mission with you as a disciple. Tomorrow I will introduce *Dwelling in the Word* as one possible way to strengthen us as a community of faith in mission together. I want you to hold me accountable in the same way that I hope you can hear my counsel when needed. I want to walk with you as a friend and worship together with you as a follower of Christ. I won't get it all right or perfect, but my prayer is that together we can make an impact where we live and worship.

One of the things that struck me in Stuart Murray's book was not that the seven convictions are new; in fact, many denominations embrace many of them. It's the combination of them together that make Anabaptism unique in its expression of faith.

May we together work in joining God in the reconciling of this broken world. It is well with my – our – soul.
Amen.