



With the Spirit's Daring:

*An Interchurch Relations Guide
for Local Settings*

*Christ is alive and goes before us
to show and share what love can do...
then let us with the Spirit's daring,
step from the past...
and seek new paths.*

*"This is a day of new beginnings"
Hymnal: A Worship Book 640*



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This is a day of new beginnings

This is a day of new beginnings,
time to remember and move on,
time to believe what love is bringing,
laying to rest the pain that's gone.

For by the life and death of Jesus,
God's mighty Spirit, now as then,
can make for us a world of difference,
as faith and hope are born again.

Then let us, with the Spirit's daring,
step from the past and leave behind
our disappointment, guilt, and grieving,
seeking new paths, and sure to find.

Christ is alive, and goes before us
to show and share what love can do.
This is a day of new beginnings—
Our God is making all things new.

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Part I: Naming Our Moment

Introduction

*I truly understand that God shows no partiality,
but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right
is acceptable to God. (Acts 10:34, 35)*

So says Peter in the face of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in the life of Cornelius. So Mennonite Church USA may say today in the face of the Spirit's transforming work in relationships between people of the Mennonite tradition and other followers of Jesus Christ. Privileged and challenged to live in a time when Mennonites find inter-church relationships blossoming all around—in personal, congregational, and denominational life—we are being called to join God's daring Spirit as we take new steps of faithfulness.

To live in such a time is a privilege. In our day we are being enriched by Evangelical, Charismatic, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant resources in print and on radio, television and the internet. We find reason to collaborate in service and witness with congregations from many traditions in our local settings. We borrow worship and prayer practices as well as leadership strategies from other Christians. We sing hymns, scripture songs and spirituals from many sources. We are blessed by personal relationships with sincere believers of other backgrounds as neighbors, co-workers, colleagues in ministry, and even within our extended families.

Such borrowing presents challenges because our tradition is committed to making faithful responses to the gospel of Jesus Christ, especially in the areas of peacemaking, service, community, and simple living. Along with the first Anabaptists, we believe that baptism and church membership are for those who have personally said yes to Jesus Christ and the church. We do not want to lose these commitments nor see them dissipate in an ecumenical water-bath. We acknowledge the painful history that has kept us apart from other Christians. The Anabaptist movement began at great cost to its participants in response to perceived errors in the Roman Catholic and Protestant versions of Christianity practiced in 16th century Europe. If we are to be faithful

This resource, designed by a team of Mennonite Church USA pastors and leaders, offers an introduction for reaching out in friendship across denominational boundaries. Because of the Spirit's daring work in our time inviting Christians to join each other in a new unity of prayer, friendship, service and witness, an extraordinary opportunity has arisen to work together to fulfill Jesus' prayer for his followers "that they may be one, as we are one" (John 17:11).

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in our time, ecumenical relationships will require active discernment, not a casual or careless disregard for our own or others' traditions.

Nevertheless, isolation and separatism are rarely our faith reality today. We are incomplete alone and represent only one part of Christ's body. Even as we cherish our own tradition, we do not claim to be the only genuine expression of the church. In a time when the church is so clearly a minority in our culture, our congregations will be stronger if we acknowledge the existence of other valid expressions of Christian faith and if we seek the Spirit's guidance for engaging thoughtfully and actively in interchurch relationships. We have much to learn from others, and they have much to learn from us. Our distinctive traditions can be clarified and invigorated in these encounters, and we will find much joy in coming to know and appreciate other members of the body of Christ. Our witness will be enlivened as together we become Christ's heart and hands in the world.

Such relationship building is not only a privilege and a challenge, but an expressed desire of Jesus, who prayed at the Last Supper for his disciples and all who would come after them:

“My prayer for all of them is that they will be one, just as you and I are one, Father—that just as you are in me and I am in you, so they will be in us, and the world will believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one—I in them and you in me, all being perfected into one. Then the world will know that you sent me and will understand that you love them as much as you love me. . . .”
(John 17:21-23)

We see the Holy Spirit at work in recent years bringing reconciliation among church bodies with divisive histories, including our own Mennonite denomination. Might this be a “kairos” moment for discovering our deeper unity and strengthening our witness to the non-Christian world? Our growth as a church engaged in God's mission will be greatly enhanced by demonstrating how much Christians love one another and by sharing that love with the rest of the world. As we move from separation to engagement, we will participate more fully in God's creative, liberating, reconciling work in the world.

So we say, “This is the day that the Lord has made.” It is time for us to move ahead with good courage and wise discernment into life-giving relationships with friends, sisters and brothers of other parts of the body of Christ as God leads and the Spirit empowers.

Background Preparation for Congregational Leaders

Perhaps your congregation is already involved in interchurch relationships. Or perhaps you'd like to begin. What kind of preparation is needed? Who should be involved in conversation or planning? What steps are useful? What cautions are advised? How do you know when a “kairos” moment for exploring friendship has arrived in your congregation?

If your congregation has not discussed the possibility of engaging with other Christians in your community (or even if you have), the first thing you will want to do is initiate exploratory conversations among congregational leaders or with persons who already sense a call to this ministry. Not for the purpose of making a decision, such informal discussions and reflection provide a context for assessing whether or not the Spirit is calling your congregation to more serious exploration and discernment. If these conversations don't spark further interest, you can probably conclude that the time isn't ripe yet for entering into interchurch relationships. Set this agenda aside until you sense the Spirit is inviting a renewed effort.

As you open the conversation, consider the following possible steps. Though these are arranged in what appears to be a logical progression, you may find the process is much less sequential. Be prepared to engage in interchurch relationships as they unfold.

1. Talk together as leaders about your own experiences with other Christian churches. Begin by offering a prayer of thanks such as the following, in which you name other church groups that have encouraged and strengthened your faith:

Gracious and eternal God,
we thank you for the bonds of love we share within your church.

We thank you for Jesus Christ,

who has joined us into one living body:

*(Name other church groups that have encouraged
or strengthened your faith...)*

Enable us, by your Spirit,

to walk together in unity of love and purpose,

to help one another by work and example,

to live in faithful obedience to your will.

By the justice and mercy we show one another,

may your name be praised,

through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

(Hymnal: A Worship Book 726)

After praying together, share stories and experiences of your encounters with other Christian faith traditions:

- a) What church backgrounds are represented among you?
 - b) What friendships or relationships have you experienced with Christians of other denominations?
 - c) What gifts have you received from others? What struggles have you experienced? What questions do you hold regarding relationships with other Christians?
 - d) What could you imagine might be some benefits of inter-church conversations and relationships? Some drawbacks?
2. Explore biblical foundations for understanding your congregation's moment in the church's history.
- a) Read Acts 10 together. Consider these questions:
 - In what ways was Peter prepared for his encounter with Cornelius?
 - What historical, cultural and religious barriers existed between Peter and Cornelius?
 - What did Peter need to give up in order to embrace Cornelius as a brother? What did he gain?
 - What is the Holy Spirit's role in this story?
 - How might these dynamics apply to you in embracing other Christians as sisters and brothers?

b) Read John 17 together. Consider these questions:

- What was the context for first century Christians to whom the Gospel of John was directed?
 - What divisions did early Christian believers experience?
 - Why do you think Jesus desires oneness for his followers?
 - Where else in the Gospels do we find a call to practice love towards fellow disciples? Does unity require uniformity?
 - What are the challenges to Christian unity you experience in your congregation? In your denomination? With Christians of other traditions?
 - What characteristics of Christian unity do you look for, hope for, or wait to see unfold? What resources are available to help you grow towards unity?
3. Visit the website of Mennonite Church USA Interchurch Relations (www.interchurchrelations.org) to review several important documents:
- "Why Interchurch Relationships?"
 - "Biblical, Historical, and Cultural Context for Interchurch Relations"
 - "Mennonite Church Statements on Interchurch Relations"
 - "Joint Statement with Mennonite World Conference"
4. You may also want to review key documents related to Mennonite Church identity, such as *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* at www.MennoniteUSA.org/history or "Who are the Mennonites?" at www.thirdway.com/menno/.
5. Discuss what gifts Mennonites bring to share with others in the wider Christian family. What gifts do you desire to give and receive?
6. Consider together whether the Spirit is calling your congregation to take new steps in interchurch relationships. Or might you be called to engage more deeply in something you are already doing? Could this be the time to move forward? Should you wait? How will you know? Who is sensing a call? Are there potential leaders for further steps?

7. Collect and tell stories of interchurch encounters. Sample stories follow:

Calling a Community to Pray for Peace

The days leading up to the invasion of Iraq were a time of prayer and concern for the Big Spring Mennonite Church in Luray, Va. Their small rural community was showing its support for impending military action through signs, flags, and letters to the editor in the local newspaper. To be a peace church amidst the shouts of war was a lonely existence until one United Methodist church in the center of town proudly displayed this message on their sign: “Pray for Peace.” That simple call to prayer, which was something not seen in other churches around the community, created a buzz of excitement among the people of Big Spring. The pastors of both the Methodist and Mennonite churches arranged to meet and decided the churches would join together in leading a Lenten prayer service for peace.

During the planning, the challenges and excitement of inter-denominational worship became evident. Both pastors and other church leaders had endless questions about the process:

- Is it okay with Mennonites if we pray for people in the military?
- Are the Methodists really committed to prayers for peace?
- Can we pray for national leaders without condoning their actions?

Trusting in the Spirit, the pastors navigated these issues and planned a contemplative service of song, silence, confession, and intercession. On the evening of the service, it became clear this would be a small gathering; all of the other invited churches and clergy members declined to take part. On that night, only a small gathering of 25 Methodists and Mennonites gathered together in Christ’s unity. Though the war seemed inevitable, those who were gathered experienced a sense of hope for the possibilities of unity in Christ.

--George Dupuy, pastor of Big Spring Mennonite Church, Luray, Va.

* * *

Baking Bread for Communion

Because of divergent views on what happens in communion, Roman Catholics and Protestants historically have not gathered together at the Lord’s Table. No church rules or doctrinal commitments, however, prevent Catholics and Protestants from eating the same bread. During Lent one year the theme in a Catholic parish was “Companions

on the Journey.” Because the word “companion” literally means “one with whom bread is shared,” it seemed an appropriate time to support the strong ecumenical interests of the parish.

Bread makers from a Catholic parish and a Presbyterian church met to bake bread together. Then on the following Sunday the bread for the Eucharist was presented by joint bread makers in both churches. In a simple, beautiful ceremony, they offered brief statements about the institutional differences that hindered their sharing of consecrated bread. They also reflected on how much they had learned from each other in the simple act of making the bread together which would be shared by both of their congregations in their individual communion services.

--John and Barbara Berger, Sacramento, Calif.

* * *

Serving Soup Together

Grace Mennonite Church in Steinbach, Man., hosts a soup meal in their church basement twice a week on Tuesday and Friday evenings. Joy Neufeld, coordinator, first thought about serving dinners to people in need several years earlier. She had “a light bulb moment” when she realized that the thought might have been God’s idea. Because there was a need in her community, she came to believe that God was asking her to get a soup kitchen started.

After visiting Winnipeg soup kitchens and discussing the idea with service and church agencies in Steinbach, she formed a committee and received approval from her congregation to use the church basement for this purpose. Volunteers to help serve the meals were invited from various churches nearby, who responded in large numbers. Farmers called to offer meat, and a butcher in a nearby town cut, wrapped, and froze the meat. Four freezers and one refrigerator were donated.

Joy says, “We try to be open and warm and welcoming. We say our guests can stay as long as they like. We do not require people to say grace ... [there are] no strings attached, no pressure.” In such an environment, people linger for conversation as they enjoy nutritious, home-cooked food. Together, the churches of Steinbach are making a difference in their community.

--from “Soup kitchen is a recipe for success,” by Leona Dueck Penner, *Canadian Mennonite*, September 20, 2004

* * *

Gathering for Prayer and Ice Cream

Over the years Mennonites and Catholics in northern Indiana have cooperated in a variety of ways. We've studied together at Goshen College, AMBS and at the University of Notre Dame. We've prayed for peace and protested war and injustice. We've reached out to one another in spiritual direction relationships. We've built houses together and served the poor and needy.

A new, more intentional step was taken when a group of Mennonites and Catholics decided to gather in a 6-week summer series for evenings of centering prayer followed by an ice cream social. Although major differences regarding worship and other practices separate Mennonites and Catholics, both groups value prayer. Because Mennonites have been borrowing contemplative prayer practices from Catholics in recent decades, praying together seemed like a good next step. Focusing on an overall theme of "Healing Through the Journey of Centering Prayer," each evening begins with singing and includes a brief presentation on centering prayer as well as ample time for prayer and reflection afterward. The evening concludes with ice cream and fellowship.

Sponsored by Bridgefolk, a grassroots organization of Mennonites and Catholics who want to share the gifts of their traditions with each other, this group hopes eventually to study "Called together to be peacemakers," the international Mennonite-Catholic dialogue document.

--Marlene Kropf, co-chair of Bridgefolk board, Elkhart, Ind.

* * *

Creating Community Vision

Living Water Community Church is located in a diverse Chicago neighborhood where most of the major faiths of the world are represented--hence the Parliament of the World's Religions chose Rogers Park for a pilot project called "Creating Community Vision." A full-time community organizer brought teams of four representing 21 faith communities together and led us through careful processes of getting to know one another and dialoguing about common points of interest for making our neighborhood a better place to live.

In the course of these encounters, I was careful not to be pushed into compromise or overlooking points of difference in faith and theology for the sake of getting along to pursue common activities. Groups were paired off to experience one another's worship services. We Mennonites were paired with an African Independent Church called the Holy Order of Cherubim and Seraphim. We chose to do exchange visits of pastors and choirs on different Sunday mornings. We enjoyed their lively Nigerian music and spirited worship.

Our first major collaborative effort as a total group resulted in a "Taste of Faith" event in the gym of a local Catholic school, where we shared music from our differing faith traditions and staffed information tables offered by each faith community in an effort to understand one another better.

As a representative of the only Mennonite congregation in the group, I suggested we make our second collaborative event a peace fair, exploring the resources for peacemaking which come from our different faith traditions. We sponsored a well-attended event involving workshops, panel discussions, music, activities for children and a time of table fellowship over a meal. Of those attending from my congregation, some were inspired and others threatened by exposure to all these different groups.

In the summer of 1999, the peace of our neighborhood was disturbed by white supremacist Benjamin Smith's random shooting at Orthodox Jews on their way to Sabbath worship. Because of the relationships forged through "Creating Community Vision," religious leaders were able to quickly organize an outdoor neighborhood rally and prayer service to express our common stand against such hate crimes. Our Jewish rabbi colleague was greatly moved by the care he received from Christian and Muslim colleagues.

In this experience we worked at interchurch relationships with other denominations and also became acquainted with members of other faiths.

--Sally Schreiner Youngquist, pastor of
Living Water Community Church, Chicago, Ill.

Part II: First Steps

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

(Ephesians 2:19-22)

As congregations begin to explore interchurch conversations, we first recognize that God has laid the foundation for our work. In Christ, we are connected far beyond our divisions. The Spirit of God has gone before us preparing our way on this journey. Before beginning new ministries or moving into new areas of service, leaders should be prepared to guide their congregations in reflection and discernment. This section includes resources to support congregations on this journey.

Taking Stock: Visions, Dreams and Counting the Cost

Many congregations have already been engaging in relationships with other Christians. Reflect on your congregation's current involvement in your community: Have you participated in joint worship (Thanksgiving or Holy Week services, hymn sings, weekly prayer services)? Are you engaged in local service projects (Habitat for Humanity, food pantries, soup kitchens)? Have you worked together as peacemakers (mediation training, peace vigils, neighborhood or school events highlighting alternatives to violence)? These experiences can lay the groundwork for deepening relationships and further conversations.

As part of taking stock, consider your hopes and fears about this work. Working toward Christian unity can be an exciting and challenging time for congregations. Although there will be many joys along the way, there will likely also be struggles and difficulties. Reflect on your expectations for this work:

- What do you hope to accomplish? What are your dreams? Your hesitations or fears?
- Will this effort be easily embraced by other Christians in your local community?

- Are you prepared for challenges that may arise? What difficulties might you anticipate? Relational struggles? Theological issues? Concerns about politics or church boundaries?
- How will you know when you have fulfilled your call? In other words, what outcomes are desired?

Just because engaging in interchurch relationships is being encouraged by denominational leaders or just because an individual or two in a congregation may be excited by the idea does not mean your church is presently being called to this ministry. Developing relationships with another church can feel like just one more duty to be accomplished unless the Spirit is calling you to do so. And even then, you will want to be sure you have adequate time and energy for such an initiative. You will want to see clearly how such initiatives fit into your congregation's call to mission—to “joyfully follow Jesus into the world.”

Discernment:

How is God's Spirit Leading our Congregation?

*I awake this morning
in the presence*

of the holy angels of God.

*May heaven open wide before me,
above me and around me*

that I may see

the Christ of my love

and his sunlit company

in all the things of earth this day. Amen.

--J. Philip Newell, *Celtic Prayers from Iona* (Paulist Press, 1997).

To see Christ and his sunlit company in all the things of earth is a daily desire and discipline for Christians. One way our eyes can be opened more fully to Christ's presence is to recognize the influence of the universal church, the invisible body of Christ. As we pray, we are joined with the saints of the past, but we are also joined with all those around the world who love and follow Christ today. Such awareness creates a more spacious arena for discernment.

As you enter into discernment regarding your congregation's call to interchurch relationships, leaders should be prepared to take as

much time as needed for the process. Prayerful discernment should include Bible study, ample time for prayer, careful consideration of the local context (both opportunities and limitations), consultation with area conference leaders, and a willingness to move at the Spirit's pace.

In small groups, Sunday school classes and in worship, Christian unity can be explored through Bible study. Although many scripture texts might profitably be used, the following introductory list provides an especially rich starting place:

Psalm 133	1 Corinthians 1, 12
John 17	Ephesians (entire book)
Acts 2, 10	

(See specific study questions for John 17 and Acts 10 on pages 6-7)

A fruitful way of encountering these passages is through *lectio divina*, a method of praying scriptures that includes time for listening and responding to the Spirit's movements in our hearts and minds. For a brief but helpful introduction to *lectio divina*, see "Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina" at www.valvermo.com/ld-art.html.

Music that might assist the congregation in its discernment:

Hymnal: A Worship Book

7	Here, O Lord, your servants gather
21	All praise to our redeeming Lord
291	O Holy Spirit, by whose breath
305	Where charity and love prevail
306	In Christ there is no East or West
307	Will you let me be your servant
365	Christ, from whom all blessings flow
373	Thou true Vine, that heals the branches
420	Heart with loving heart united
421	Bless'd be the tie that binds
436	All who believe and are baptized
452	Ubi caritas et amor
460	Una espiga (Sheaves of summer)
475	Become to us the living Bread

Sing the Journey (Hymnal: A Worship Book – Supplement 1)

3	Jesus calls us here to meet him
4	You've got a place at the welcome table
38	Beloved, God's chosen
52	Jesus, help us live in peace
72	One is the body (see last page of this resource)

Another arena for examining questions of discernment is preaching. For sample Mennonite sermons on themes of Christian unity, check the Interchurch Relations website (www.interchurchrelations.org).

As part of the congregation's discernment, think together about several possible levels of engagement and consider which kind of activity the congregation might be ready for, such as:

- 1) informal, personal friendships and relationships
- 2) joint projects – community service
- 3) worship – joint celebrations or prayer gatherings
- 4) theological dialogue – substantive engagement around specific topics

The further down the list one proceeds, the more difficult and demanding is the engagement.

A further step of discernment is to consider whether anyone is being called to this work. In the church's ministries, God calls individuals and congregations to particular tasks. Congregational leaders or a designated group will be wise to consider questions such as the following:

Is our congregation ready for this work? In each congregation, God has called forth different gifts and ministries. Congregations may be especially gifted in the areas of evangelism, peacemaking, discipleship, or service, to name a few. Likewise, some congregations may be called especially to ecumenical ventures.

Who should be involved? Some congregations will sense a call to enter into dialogue or friendship on a large scale, while others will move more slowly. Perhaps an interested small group or Sunday school class would prefer to explore interchurch relationships in smaller, less formal ways.

Who will lead? Are members of your congregation already expressing interest in working with other churches? Are members already engaging in friendship and conversation with others in the broader community? As you consider calling leaders for this ministry, look especially for the following gifts and capacities:

- Maturity of faith, with ability to tell one’s own faith story with passion and humility, as well as the ability and commitment to listen lovingly to others’ stories of faith;
- Clear commitment to one’s own Mennonite identity, with a desire to hospitably engage in conversation with those from other Christian traditions.

Whom should we engage? Is there a congregation in your community with whom you already have connections or involvement? Is there another group nearby with similar interests? Should you seek out a group with a background like yours, even another Mennonite-related group, or should you deliberately choose a group with a background very unlike your own? Are you being called to make a brand new contact and build new bridges?

Blessing for Engaging in Interchurch Relationships

If, after prayerful discernment, the congregation and its leaders sense the Spirit is leading them to explore interchurch relationships further, they will want to bless those being called to the ministry of Christian unity and seek the Spirit’s guidance for this new work. Emphasize that this is part of the church’s call to engage with God’s mission in the world. Worship resources such as the following might be used in a worship service focusing on Christian unity.

Call to Worship

- 1 The Lord Almighty is with us.
- 2 God calls people together from places far and wide.
- 3 God calls people to come home.

- 1 Christ our Lord is with us,
- 2 gathering us into one body, without borders,
- 3 breathing into us new life, everlasting life.

- 1 The Spirit of God is with us,
- 2 healing the wounds of division and making peace,
- 3 that we may become one people.

- 1 Make us one, mighty God!
- 2 Make us one, loving Lord Jesus!
- 3 Make us one, healing Holy Spirit!

ALL *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,* we gather as one people to worship. Thanks be to God!*

(alternatively: In the name of the Creator, Christ, and the Holy Spirit...)

Prayer of Confession

Leader Loving God, you call us to unity, but still we are divided.

People **Lord, have mercy.**

Leader Christ Jesus, you call us to be healers, but still we nurse old wounds.

People **Christ, have mercy.**

Leader Holy Spirit, you urge us to new life, but still we hold on to old prejudices.

People **Lord, have mercy.**

(free prayers of confession or intercession)

Leader Deliver us from the evils that separate us from your love and fellowship, and lead us into your boundless peace,

People **that all may know we are your people.**

ALL *Come, Lord Jesus. Make us one; make us whole. AMEN*

Benediction

- 1 The Lord Almighty is with us,
calling people together from places far and wide,
calling people to come home.
 - 2 Christ our Lord sends us forth
to bring healing to the wounded
and to speak peace to the suffering.
 - 3 The Holy Spirit promises to go with us,
guiding us on our way,
giving boldness and courage.
- 1, 2, 3 We leave this place as one people,
claimed, blessed, and called by God.

ALL *In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit,*
we go forth to serve.
Thanks be to God!*

(alternatively: In the name of the Creator, Christ, and the Holy Spirit...)

Stepping Out in Faith

After discussion and prayer, discernment and worship, it is finally time to make the first steps in conversation with others. Trust that God will accompany you on this journey, even as the Spirit has already prepared the way.

Part III: Journey Guide

By now you've discerned your congregation's call to engage in interchurch relationships. A group of leaders has been chosen and blessed for the journey. The congregation is supporting them in prayer. As they begin to make initial contacts with other churches, those representing the congregation may find it helpful to refresh their skills of hospitality. Initial impressions can either support or distract from satisfactory encounters, as the following story illustrates.

A Mennonite congregation and a neighboring church found themselves in the first stages of an intentional friendship. At the initiative of the Mennonite church outreach committee, members of the neighboring parish were invited to a Thanksgiving service at the Mennonite church. The first Mennonite to arrive discovered that several visitors were already there and seemed confused about what to do next. No host or greeters had been assigned to show up early to welcome visitors, point out which door was the proper entrance, and direct them to the sanctuary for the service. Quickly filling in as an impromptu host, the early-arriving Mennonite introduced herself, guided the guests into the building, and introduced them to the space. What could have been a disastrous beginning was narrowly averted.

Primer on Hospitality

Whether you are visiting another congregation or inviting them into your space, preparation is essential. How will you equip yourselves internally to "Welcome one another ... just as Christ has welcomed you" (Romans 15:7)? What preparations or changes in your physical space might be required? Potential areas of preparation might include the following:

Attitudes and motives

Examine your deepest attitudes toward your neighboring congregation and your motives for friendship. Enter this experience with a genuine willingness to learn about other Christian communities instead of comparing their practices with Mennonite practices. Try to talk

less about “how Mennonites do things” and instead listen openly and ask questions to gain an understanding of their faith.

Check any attempts to patronize at the door. Your neighboring church is a legitimate congregation that has been doing real ministry as a body of Christ -- you have as much to learn as to share.

Expect that some in your own congregation might not be enthused by your commitment. Assure those who are concerned that you are working toward Christian unity (friendship between churches) in order to offer a better witness to the gospel. Emphasize that you are not trying to convert others or blur the distinctions between denominations.

Plan for conversation

Don't hesitate to “coach” the group on how to talk with others before visits.

- 1) Good ice-breaker topics include:
 - When was your church founded?
 - How long have you been a member?
 - What's one of your favorite things about your church?
 - Ask about the building – often a source of pride for congregations (then pay attention to the history that is shared).
- 2) Avoid personal questions that imply judgment or negative comparisons, such as:
 - How many members do you have? How many of those attend regularly?
 - How often do you change pastors? Do they just move around every few years?
- 3) Avoid “curiosity” questions such as:
 - What's the deal with all the robes on your pastors?
 - So, do you really pray to Mary?

Though the time will come for more intimate questions, these questions should be reserved for a later stage in the friendship.

Appearance

If you'll be visiting another church, ask ahead of time about the customary apparel for both men and women in the congregation. For

example, many African American congregations dress formally for worship. In other settings, casual dress may be appropriate.

Preview

Certainly the best way to prepare a group to visit another group is through personal contact. If a natural friendship already exists between two or more folks or among work colleagues in both congregations, ask those folks to do a little pre-visit research so all will be comfortable. Find out about such things as: arrival time, where to park, which entrance to use, style of worship (i.e., will someone hug you during the passing of the peace?), where to sit, what to do if there is coffee hour or Christian education, etc.

A second option is to use children's books to get the essentials before visiting, such as *What You Will See Inside...* (a series of illustrated books designed to show children, ages 6-10, the who, what, when, where, why and how of traditional houses of worship as well as liturgical celebrations and rituals of different world faiths). Such information empowers us to better respect and understand our own religious traditions as well as those of our friends and neighbors. Available at www.skylightpaths.com.

Before guests visit you

Spend a little time with each area above, and volunteer more information than you think necessary for your coming guests.

Don't assume they know about such things as parking, restrooms, entrances, which books to use during the service, or how much guests can participate. In some traditions, only members do certain things. To some visitors, the sharing time in Mennonite worship is a foreign concept -- assure them they don't need to speak, or if they do, tell them the typical length of sharing for your group. Be sure to clarify your congregation's practices if guests will be visiting on a communion Sunday.

Plan ahead with pastors/worship leaders if the guests will be acknowledged and how they will be introduced.

Planning Joint Activities

First steps in joint activities can take many forms. Some possibilities are:

Spiritual friendships. Beginning with one or two members of each congregation, meet together for prayer, discussion, and mutual support. As friendships develop, others may be invited to join.

Seasonal worship. Join together with congregations or other small groups for simple services of worship during Christmas, Holy Week or Easter season. Evening song and prayer services are often appealing.

Bread making. This simple act can be a wonderful way to come together. Gather with others from local churches for fellowship while making bread. Afterward, the bread may be used in the respective congregations during communion (if appropriate), or it may be given to those in need.

Service/prayer groups. Many congregations are already joining together to do service work in the community. Consider ending your work with a time of fellowship and a brief time of worship and prayer.

Book study. Join others in discussion of contemporary and/or classic Christian works. If your groups feel comfortable doing so, you might even choose to study a book of the Bible together.

Prayers for other churches. Just as Paul sent greetings and blessings to the scattered churches, consider sending your blessings to others. Example: “To our sisters and brothers in Christ gathered at Middletown Assembly of God Church, greetings and peace to you from First Mennonite Church.”

Pulpit exchanges. Trade preachers on special Sundays, such as Reformation Sunday. Plan a potluck afterward so congregational members can become personally acquainted with the visiting preacher.

Hymn sing. While singing is an important expression of Mennonite faith, our churches are deeply ecumenical in our musical choices. Join another congregation in a time of singing traditional and contemporary songs of worship.

Share music groups. If you have a youth choir, children’s choir, male quartet or praise band, send them to sing on a Sunday at your partner church. The next Sunday, receive one of their musical groups. Ask musicians from your congregation to lead worship with them in a joint number.

Clean up the church yard. In fall or spring, offer to join your church neighbors in an outdoor clean-up day. At noon, roast wieners around a bonfire or a barbecue grill.

Have fun and experience a blessing!

Engaging in Theological Conversations

Although theological conversations are likely not the place to begin in forming friendships with another church (just as they probably aren’t the place to begin in forming most kinds of friendships!), some groups may become so intrigued by each other’s beliefs that they will decide to explore these convictions. Such conversations can be informative and open deeper understanding for everyone involved.

Several steps can be taken to ensure that these conversations will be mutually enriching.

- Begin small – between pastors, with a small group of leaders, or with a small selected group of congregational members.
- Agree together upon the purpose of the conversation. Focus on listening carefully to one another. Decide how you will handle conflict if it arises.
- Encourage those engaged in the conversation to read recommended books about the other’s tradition or visit appropriate websites. For example, Mennonites can

encourage others to visit the Mennonite Church USA website at www.MennoniteUSA.org or www.thirdway.com.

For reading, suggest:

Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (Herald Press, 1995)

Marlene Kropf and Kenneth Nafziger, *Singing: A Mennonite Voice* (Herald Press, 2001)

Harry Loewen, Steven Nolt, et al. *Through Fire and Water: An Overview of Mennonite History* (Herald Press, 1996)

John D. Roth, *Beliefs: Mennonite Faith and Practice* (Herald Press, 2005)

C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Orbis, 2004)

- Tell stories and sing songs – even in theological conversations.
- Report regularly to the congregation’s leadership team and the rest of the congregation regarding insights and learnings. Focus on the ways faith is being enriched by these dialogues.

Planning Rituals of Forgiveness and Healing

In recent years Mennonites have become involved with other denominations in rituals of forgiveness and healing. See stories of reconciliation between Mennonites and the Reformed Church as well as Mennonites and Catholics in the 2004 Quarter 4 issue of *Courier* (Mennonite World Conference publication). Available at: www.mwc-cmm.org

If there is a particular history of animosity or estrangement between your congregation and another church in your area, consider planning a service of reconciliation and healing after you have engaged in common activities. Be especially alert to the possibility of reconciliation with other Mennonite groups or with people who have left your congregation to start other churches. Invite your area conference minister or congregational overseer to assist you in the planning.

Ongoing Reflection

Engaging in interchurch relationships requires ongoing assessment and reflection. Are trust and friendship deepening? Do you sense the body of Christ is becoming more unified? Are you meeting unexpected challenges?

After engaging in joint activities, your congregation may desire a better biblical foundation for interchurch relationships. Consider organizing a Sunday school class or weeknight study on Christian unity or plan a worship series focusing on the scripture passages suggested on page 14.

Telling the Story of Interchurch Relationships

As friendships grow between congregations, the stories of these encounters need to be shared. The most important place for stories to be told is within the congregations directly engaged with one another. You might feature a regular moment in worship (perhaps once a month) in which someone tells a story of what they are experiencing or learning. Pray regularly for the neighboring congregation.

Pastors can share the news of what is happening when they meet in pastor-peer groups or with the local ministerium. The religion reporter of the local newspaper will no doubt be interested in the story as well. Leaders should request workshop slots at area conference gatherings to tell the story and also write articles for the area conference newsletter.

One thing to be prepared for is the likelihood of increased opportunities for service, witness, and prayer. When Christians discover the joy of working and worshiping with other members of the body of Christ, their faith is strengthened and they find new energy for Christian witness.

Part IV: Additional Resources

Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (Herald Press, 1995) has much to say about unity on the basis of John 17.

Colson, Charles and Richard John Neuhaus, ed. *Toward a Common Mission: Evangelicals and Catholics Together* (Word, 1995).

Courier (the newsletter of Mennonite World Conference), Spring 2001. Stories of reconciliation can be found at www.mwc-cmm.org/Courier/2001/01q2pg03.html.

Esau, Ken. "The Biblical Call to Unity: Implications for Mennonite Brethren." See www.directionjournal.org/article/?681#8. Other valuable resources are listed in his footnotes as well.

Gros, Jeffrey and John Rempel, ed. *The Fragmentation of the Church and Its Unity in Peacemaking* (Eerdmans, 2001).

Guidelines for membership in Mennonite Church USA include a short section on unity: www.mcusa.mennonite.net/membership_guidelines/membership_guidelines.html

Interchurch Relations of Mennonite Church USA submitted a joint statement with Mennonite World Conference on the topic of unity: see www.interchurchrelations.org/core/mwc.php.

Kinnamon, Michael and Brian Cope, ed. *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Eerdmans, 1997).

McLaren, Brian D. *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Zondervan, 2004). See especially chapter 13, "Why I am (Ana)baptist/Anglican."

Meyer, Albert J. "Renew Your Whole Church, O Lord," *The Mennonite* (June 7, 2005), 12-13.

Oswald, Laurie. "Mennonite Catholic Bridge in Rural Iowa," available on Bridgefolk website: www.bridgefolk.net (Fall, 2004 newsletter).

Radano, Monsignor John A. Reflections on Catholic-Mennonite dialogue from the Catholic perspective: www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/PCCUMENN.HTM.

Roth, John D. "Give & take: thoughts on a healthy Mennonite ecumenism," *The Mennonite* (January 4, 2005), 8-10.

Thomas, Everett. "Christian churches together," editorial in *The Mennonite* (January 18, 2005).

"Ut Unum Sint" [That They May Be One], the encyclical by Pope John Paul II in 1995 on Christian unity: www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint_en.html.

Church Unity and the Papal Office: An Ecumenical Dialogue on John Paul II's Encyclical "Ut Unum Sint," edited by Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Eerdmans, 2001), which is a theological and ecumenical response to "Ut Unum Sint."

See also their very short book, *In One Body Through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity* (Eerdmans, 2003).

Building Unity: Ecumenical Dialogues with Roman Catholic Participation in the United States, edited by Joseph Burgess and Jeffrey Gros (Paulist Press, 1989) is the most complete compendium of ecumenical documents produced in the United States, including conciliar and bilateral dialogues in which Roman Catholics have participated.

Yoder, John Howard. *The Ecumenical Movement and the Faithful Church* (Mennonite Publishing House, 1958).

Denominational Glossary

Describing a denomination is a task fraught with difficulty and the danger of over-simplification. But knowing about other Christian traditions can keep us from stumbling as we reach out in friendship. Hospital chaplains are often good resources for these descriptions since they minister across denominations -- perhaps your congregation has a chaplain you can ask.

For additional information, see helpful comparative charts at www.religionfacts.com/christianity/charts.htm.

A source for more information on worldwide Christian denominations than can easily be absorbed is a free encyclopedia called Wikipedia, which can be edited by users: [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List of Christian denominations](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Christian_denominations).

A list of families of Christian denominations can be found at www.religioustolerance.org/chr_deno.htm.

Part V: Evaluation of Guide

Interchurch Relations of Mennonite Church USA seeks your feedback and counsel regarding this resource. If you will take a few moments to respond to the following questions, we will be grateful. Please send your comments to André Gingerich Stoner, Director of Interchurch Relations, at: AndreGS@MennoniteUSA.org.

1. What did you find most helpful in this guide?
2. What was not particularly helpful?
3. What questions remain for you?
4. What additional resources for interchurch relationships do you desire?

Please send your stories about friendship, reconciliation, or joint activities between churches to André Gingerich Stoner.

For additional copies of this guide, go to OneSource at www.MennoniteUSA.org. For additional resources for interchurch relationships, see www.interchurchrelations.org.