

Welcome to Indonesia, my dear siblings. Whether you are from abroad or from Indonesia, I am very happy to see you all in this place. I am also happy because I know that many more are participating in this event from all over the world through the internet.

It all started at the lunch table during the 15<sup>th</sup> MWC General Assembly in Asuncion, Paraguay in 2009. As some of the Indonesian delegates and participants were enjoying lunch together, we started to wonder if we, too, can be the host for MWC assembly. As soon as we returned to Indonesia, the leaders of the three Indonesian Mennonite synods agreed to meet together to explore the possibility further. We then submitted an official invitation letter to the MWC Executive Board when they met in Ethiopia in 2010. We were eager to have MWC family come to visit us here in Indonesia. And praise the Lord that during the General Council meeting in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 2015, our invitation was officially accepted by the General Council.

We rushed to start preparing everything. But then Covid-19 came. And I have to confess that there was a time when I did not believe that the MWC General Assembly would ever be possible to happen at all.

And yet, this evening we gather together at Sangkakala School of Theology here in Central Java, Indonesia, to begin our journey together. We rejoice that we can be together despite the precautions that are still needed. We may not be able to hug each other, or speak freely to each other without a mask, or even give a handshake to others.

The very fact that this event can take place is because God, whom we know in Jesus Christ, is so gracious to us. And of course, it is also because many good people have worked together very hard to make this happen. This 17<sup>th</sup> MWC General Assembly also marks a new way of doing the assembly by which we can learn, worship, and fellowship with participants at satellite locations here in Indonesia and gathering online in groups and families around the world.

After Jesus has risen from the dead, the first thing that he said to his disciples according to the gospel of Matthew is, "Do not be afraid" (Matt. 28:10 NRSV).

To some extent, we too have passed through death. After more than two years in the shadow of death—of grief and fear and feeling of loss of control— due to this global Covid-19 pandemic, we are beginning again to open our doors to the world and to gather together in this assembly.

And so we will begin this assembly with the very same message that Jesus gave his disciples, "Do not be afraid."

Fear is the greatest enemy of all. In our communities around the world,

- We are afraid of losing our church members, therefore we reshape our churches to be centers for entertainment rather than communities of disciples
- We are afraid of becoming poor, therefore we exploit the earth to feed our greed
- We are afraid of being a minority in our societies, therefore we deny hospitality to foreigners and strangers who come to our countries in need
- We are afraid of death, therefore we demand guns and other tools of violence in our hands so that we can kill those whom we perceive as a threat to us
- We are afraid of losing power and control over others, therefore we exclude those of different ethnicities, religions, social statuses, and even those of different sexual orientations and gender identities

We need to remind ourselves again and again what Jesus told us two thousand years ago, "Do not be afraid."

We are celebrating our fellowship this week under the theme, *Following Jesus Together Across Barriers*.

There is a line in the poem "Mending Wall" by the American poet Robert Frost that says, "Good fences make good neighbors."

A good fence does seem to make many things in our life clear: my territory, my ethnicity, my religion, and even my identity. We want to rely on a good fence to keep us safe and secure.

But this week we will walk and learn and share together to challenge this wisdom.

As members of the Anabaptist-Mennonite family, we should dare say to the world that this so-called wisdom has shown itself to be so destructive. Fences always divide. They divide people against each other, and people against the earth.

These barriers, as old as the Great Wall in China, and as new as border walls in Southern Texas and Arizona, Eastern Poland, Bethlehem, in the illegally occupied Donbas – the territory of Ukraine, are also found in our hearts and everyday relationships.

Jesus came to the world precisely to break down these barriers. For Jesus, the correct wisdom was never "good fences make good neighbors," but always "good neighbors make good fences."

It was for that very purpose that while Jesus is destroying any kinds of barriers that separate us from the others and the earth, Jesus is also building up a *diaklesia*, not simply *ecclesia*, that is, an open church that passes through and crosses over boundaries (Adiprasetya 2018).

As members of the Anabaptist-Mennonite family, we have learned that hospitality is one of the main virtues that we all hold dearly and have strived to practice since our first Anabaptist ancestors in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. We need to offer unconditional hospitality. A hospitality where the host and the guest stand on the same and equal footing. There is only one set of rules for all; the host and the guest alike. The guest can even change roles and become the host (Derrida 2000), as Jesus did to Zacheus. And as the conversation continues, the roles of the host and the guest can be interchanged so that a true and genuine conversation, *konvivenz*, can take place between them (Yong 2008). It is that kind of hospitality that will enable us to cross all barriers, whether ethnicity, religion, denomination, nationality, sexual orientation and gender identity, and so forth and so on. But to open up our arms and offer hospitality so that we can embrace others and the earth, we must be willing to be vulnerable.

We have long been accustomed not to embracing, but to excluding others and the earth, because "we" want to feel safe and secure from "them". Too many of us are not bothered by the great walls around us, between us, and within us, since those walls are in fact protecting "us" and keeping away our fear.

Yet the time has come for us to evaluate this kind of artificial safety and security, because if we keep doing what we are doing, no one will remain in the church and on the earth which God created for abundance.

If we can learn anything at all from the Covid-19 pandemic, it is the wisdom that "nobody is safe until everybody is safe." As long as we are still excluding others and the earth, we will never know real safety and security.

So, dear siblings in Christ, let us join hands—in our hearts and spirits, even if not physically— in following Jesus together across all the barriers that have protected some of us, but not others, across the great walls that have made only a few, safe and secure.

Let us be vulnerable as Jesus was and is, so that we can embrace all our siblings from across God's world and this earth, no matter how different they may be from us. We need to learn from the ecosystem, that it is precisely our diversities that hold us intact together. We are even baptized by water, so that we, human beings, and the earth can embrace each other and be integrated into each other, not destroy each other. It is not enough to claim unity in diversity. We should be able to go beyond that to claim diversity for unity.

I do not say that we have to embrace one another carelessly and uncritically, without any judgment at all. But I do say that the judgment should not come from *a priori*, from before we learn to be together. As the experience of living together here in this diverse nation of Indonesia shows us every day, crossing barriers is not about "cheap tolerance," which requires little effort or commitment, but it is about creating space and time for others, about participating in hospitality.

That is the way that Jesus has demonstrated. He embraces us, and creates a space and time for us, while we are yet sinners. And that same Jesus is also the One who is now calling us, "Follow me" (Matt. 4:9 NRSV). So let us set out together, *Following Jesus Together Across Barriers*. Berkah Dalem (= God bless).

Kopeng, Salatiga – Indonesia, July 5, 2022

The Opening Ceremony of the 17<sup>th</sup> Mennonite World Conference General Assembly

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