

Mennonite Confessions of Faith and Doubt – Part I

1 Corinthians 12:1-11 by Patty Friesen (Jan.17/16)

It became apparent last month when we were talking about church membership and baptism that it wasn't only the youth who needed catechism but there were some of our elders who confessed to not having their faith all figured out even though they were baptized 60 years ago! So it appears that we all need to have a catechism refresher course this month, to remind ourselves what we believe and why, so we are going to look at the Mennonite Confession of Faith these next three Sundays, the Snoozer Series as my husband Patrick calls it. I'm basing this series on a talk Karl Koop from Canadian Mennonite University gave at our Menno Church Sask Equipping Day last October.

It so happens that this year is the 20th anniversary of The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective and it may be time to write another one. There have been 14 Mennonite Confessions of Faith written in our 500 years of history, which averages out to one every 35 years or so – which is a generation – which is appropriate that each generation re-writes the confession of faith for relevance and recommitment in our time. CJ Dyck, Saskatchewan Mennonite historian theologian said that Mennonites have had more confessions of faith than anyone else in the Reformation, more than the Lutherans, Reformed, Anglicans, Presbyterians, anyone. He suggested it maybe that we write so many confessions of faith because we take our faith so seriously or it may be because we are always trying to define ourselves or it may be because we are so fractious and are always trying to find something to agree on.

Now a confession of faith is different from a creed. In 372 AD, when Roman Emperor Constantine accepted Christianity and made everyone in the Roman empire

Christian, he commissioned the Christian leaders and bishops to come up with the Apostle's Creed – a concise statement of faith that everyone agreed to that represented what the Christian faith is all about. It is #712 HWB and let's read it together. Please keep your hymnals open. Some traditions memorize the Apostles creed, which isn't a bad idea. But as you can see we have numerous creeds or statements of faith in the hymnal if you flip through them #710-717 because we believe there are many ways to describe who Jesus is and what we believe about him.

Now please turn to #479, #479 – Lord of our Growing Years. This section of the hymnal is titled Faith Journey with the subtitle Nurture. This second of the hymnal suggests that we are nurtured in the faith, we grow into our understanding of God and how God is working in our lives. This Faith Journey section continues for 150 hymns, if you flip through this section. In our faith journey we experience the call of Jesus. We experience a turning to Jesus or conversion #499 Lord, Speak to Me. But we believe our conversion isn't only a one time turning but we have to continually turn or the word used here is regeneration, a recommitment to our faith. Then #520, Oh, for a closer walk with God; our faith journey involves continual confession of what is separating us from God and others and a repentance of those separations. #534 Prince of Peace Control My Will. As Mennonites we believe not only in being saved from our sins but a turning over of our lives in discipleship and obedience to how Jesus would want us to live so there's a whole section of those hymns.

Then #551 In the Stillness of the Evening begins a whole section on faith and doubt. Brilliant hymnal organizers that recognize the faith journey is not a four-lane highway to certainty. Paul Tillich says the opposite of faith is not doubt but is certainty.

If we are certain about things, we have no need for faith or trust in mystery. The Faith Journey section of the hymnal continues with other dichotomies – suffering and joy and ending with death and eternal life. A brilliant piece of work, this hymnal and it is a musical confession of faith that is diverse and flexible and more interesting and palatable than this written confession of faith which has been used like a creed lately.

As Mennonites, we don't believe in creeds or statements defining what you had to believe to be a Christian. We were more interested in how a person lived out their faith. So we made confessions of faith instead, meaning – this is what we've come to understand or this is what guides us in our faith and how we live that out – not what we steadfastly believe for certain that saves us from hell.

This 1995 Confession of Faith was written at the joining together of the Old Mennonites or Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church. It was at the same time that we jointly printed the blue hymnal. The confession was to guide our faith and the hymnal was to guide our worship. It's an interesting parallel journey with how we've used these two books. Previous to this 1995 confession – the General Conference had a 1941 Confession of Faith but it was the 1950 Catechism book with its 199 questions and right answers written in German served as a Confession of Faith for General Conference Mennonites. John Wall said that he didn't understand a word of the German catechism but memorized it anyway to please his mother, sixty some years ago. Other elders have said they were baptized and joined the church so they could get married! We've had such effective ways of bringing people into the church in the past!

The Old Mennonites had a 1963 Confession that required veiling for women in church and short hair for men so the joint merger was the perfect opportunity to wrestle

with what was really important to us as the Mennonite Church – what makes us distinct beyond prayer coverings for women and short hair for men? How do we convey and teach who we are to our own youth and to people in the community and on the mission field? We needed a systematic look at what we believed about the Trinity – God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, atonement – how we are joined to God, the church and what grounds our peace theology. We need confessions of faith to help us articulate what we believe. We've all had those moments visiting with non-Mennos when they ask so what do Mennonites believe? Ah, um...Confessions of Faith are helpful for those awkward moments when we don't really know what we believe. We can just hand people this book and be done with it.

The 1980's and 1990's were exciting times for Mennonite theologians. Saskatoon's Mennonite historian theologian, Walter Klassen was digging back into what the early Anabaptists believed and John Howard Yoder's Politics of Jesus took the Mennonite and evangelical world by the tail. It was the perfect storm to create a new confession of faith and in the introduction of the confession – it says how it is to be used as a guide for the interpretation of scripture – it doesn't replace scripture, as a statement of unity or agreed upon positions for within the church and outside of it, for instruction of new members and conversation with people of other faiths, and as a guide for the candidacy, licensing and ordination of pastors and chaplains.

Now with regard to this bit, the confession of faith has been helpful for Mennonite churches looking for pastors because we've gotten ourselves in trouble with non-denominational pastors leading churches out of Mennonite conferences because it turns out they don't actually believe this stuff. I've been through enough job changes and

interviews with Mennonite credentialing boards that I can safely tell you that I believe most of this stuff. When we license Julie Bergen for chaplaincy in a couple of months, she'll have to figure out what she believes of this stuff but I appreciate that all my credentialing interrogations haven't begun with the bright light and the confession of faith but with a calm sharing of my personal faith journey. And then in the light of that – how do I fit with the Mennonite Confession of Faith?

For us also at Osler Mennonite when we deacons meet with new members – we begin with sharing our faith journeys – how have we seen God in our lives and what are our ongoing questions and doubts. It's beautiful and bonding times with new members and when new members share in church, they don't go through the confession and what they agree with or not. They share about how they see God at work in their lives and how that brings them to Osler Mennonite at this time to help them in their Christian walk. We begin with our lived experience with God and then figure out what we believe and how we should live from there. So stay tuned for Mennonite Confessions of Faith and Doubt Part II next Sunday...Let's pray...