

## **A Balancing Act**

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The question is not unlike Zeno's paradox. How does one form a peace community that engages the world and yet embodies a social alternative? Connecting with the world means conversing with the world. But as soon as you start to talk like everyone else, you think and behave like everyone else. You lose your critical distance. You get tempted to use your influence, to apply pressure, to exercise power. The peace witness is elusive. It is a tight-rope act.

This has been the experience of the Mennonite denominations in their attempts to follow the advice of St. Paul to be in the world, but not of it. The community of Jesus should stand over against the world as a prophetic witness of how life can be. And yet it is not its own *raison d'être*. It exists to serve that world. Now if involvement with secular instances is necessary in order to call them to act justly, that implies the community will also be influenced by that "other". The result: In any given community of faith there are those who think that some among their number make too many compromises and these others think their non-compromising brothers and sisters are dragging their heels. The Anglican fellowship is currently experiencing this push-me, pull-you on various issues, most notably with regard to homosexuality. (Conversely, it is not without significance that on a matter that is also dear to the hearts of Mennonites, namely poverty and social injustice in undeveloped countries, the Anglican bishops are undivided in their advocacy for revised political priorities.)

Depending on whether you see the glass half-empty or half-full, you can call this situation a chronic problem or the challenge of faith. It is a reflection of that most fundamental and yet difficult of theological concepts, God's incarnation in Christ. Divine acts in human form? Is that not the ultimate balancing act?

From its very beginnings the Mennonite movement struggled with the question of how to distinguish community from world. All agree that doctrine cannot be the shibboleth of faith, because we are called to be doers of the word and not hearers only. That is, not what we affirm, but how we live must be the mark of Christ in our communities. Therefore, instead of confessions of faith, exclusion from community was used to exercise power over others. The breakaway community of the Amish began when the Mennonite leader Jakob Ammann decreed that any member of the congregation who told a falsehood should be excommunicated and shunned. If Ammann had convinced the majority of Mennonites of the correctness of his views, who knows? Perhaps all Mennonites today would be wearing long beards or kerchiefs.

Through several centuries shunning became the main tool of the hardliners for maintaining the purity of the faith. As a psychological control mechanism it worked. But leaders fearful of change often erred on the side of zealotry. For a community that holds high the banner of peace and reconciliation, it is humbling and disappointing to see how our history is repeatedly marred by conflicts that led to schism. In the last few decades Mennonites have gone another way, reaching out to others with new-found self-confidence. An example of this is the fruitful dialogue with the Roman Catholic church, which has led us to embrace each other in our differences. Two centuries ago, driven off by their persecutors, Mennonites ensconced themselves in isolated corners of the world. Now we speak boldly to government agencies and work for change, trusting that prophetic witness is the best means for keeping our faith communities alive.