

17 Pieces of Peace

James J. Fehr
Director, German Mennonite Peace Committee

When I was a child, I thought like a child. When I was a hippie, I thought like a hippie: I thought: Why can't everyone live in peace? Growing up was painful. I learnt that when you bump into sharp objects, it hurts. And I learnt that when you bump up against other people, they sometimes have sharp edges.

The Mennonite Church has often been stylized as an "historical peace church". And yet we too quarrel amongst ourselves. How reassuring it would be to believe that conflict exists "out there" in the world, whereas we enjoy the blessings and comforts of harmonious faithful living in our peace communities. How reassuring, how naive. Community life is full of great joys and surprises. It is full of laughter and wonder. It supplies friendship, emotional support, meaningful work, intellectual challenges, divine inspiration. But you cannot live in community without difficulties, duties, rules, restrictions and – dare I say it? – personalities.

When we confess that our faith community is the foretaste of the ultimate Kingdom of God, why does it sometimes have a bitter flavour? Are we missing the right ingredients? Perhaps we should simply gloss everything over with sugar. But no. There is a more honest, life-affirming and godly approach that has taken hold in some of our Mennonite communities. One example among many is the work of Bridge-Builders at London Mennonite Centre, which offers courses on conflict transformation in various churches in England. We begin by confessing that we are conflictual and prejudiced, but that this situation is not in itself evil. It depends on how we deal with it. When we react to dispute with gossip, when we react to divisions by building alliances, the seeds of greater strife have been sown. But when members of a community are able to speak their mind directly to one another and are prepared to hear what their "enemies" have to say, a great deal has been won. It is an important starting point. Without such communication, the community cannot proceed on the way to forgiveness and healing.

A good friend of mine recently confessed to me his dissatisfaction with the attribution "peace church" for the Mennonites. He has witnessed so many unresolved disputes among us that he would prefer we set aside this appellation for a few decades. We have not arrived at a place of peace.

I do not claim to have the solution for this disarray. But I will make two observations that are equally true for any efforts at achieving peace on the larger political stage. First, we adopt the individualist spirit of our age all too often and leave the broken potsherds at the feet of the warring parties. We set aside an essential element of our humanity: that we are responsible for each other. The work of peace is seldom possible without a third party who is disinterested and yet keenly interested in achieving reconciliation. Second, we need to be clear about goals. There is no place of peace. In a broken, displaced world, peace should not be idealised as an enduring state. Peace is like all goodness in the world ephemeral. It consists of discrete deeds of reconciliation in a warring world. Our community may never be "peaceful", yet it lives in its peaceful deeds.

I once purchased a clay sculpture of four figures with their arms flung around each other. Three minutes after I bought it, it shattered into 17 pieces. The patient work of gluing it back together was an exercise in rebuilding; the sculpture with its visible cracks has become a symbol of peace.