

Q&A

Shifting South

**An interview with Mennonite World Conference leaders
Nancy Heisey and Nzash Lumeya**

Today 60 percent of all Christians live in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Meetinghouse, a group of Mennonite editors, asked a Mennonite and a Mennonite Brethren leader to help us understand how this affects Anabaptist-Mennonite churches—and why next month's Mennonite World Conference gathering in Africa is so important.

What does it mean to say that the Southern Hemisphere is changing the face of Christianity?

Nancy Heisey: The measures of growth in the Christian family in the two-thirds world and the shift of the percentages within that family from Northern to Southern Hemisphere are statistics. Two observations offer more insight into these changes than the numbers themselves.

First, just as early Christians moved out from Jerusalem into all directions of the known world (and not just to Rome and Europe as we usually learn), today the Christian family is truly a round-the-world family. The promise of Revelation 5:9—that people of every tribe and language and people and nation are within the community praising God—has been fulfilled in our time, and this reality is a great blessing to us all.

Second, members of the Christian family in the two-thirds world are helping churches everywhere rediscover our Christian roots. Like members of the early Christian movement, believers in many places today live with a lively awareness of the spirit world and a concrete belief that God's Spirit gives them the power they need to respond to the other spirit powers of their world. Our Southern sisters and brothers, in a way similar to what is recorded in the New Testament, understand that God is at work everywhere, not only in the small corners of our personal lives. As did the early Christians, today's growing churches are carrying out Jesus' healing, liberating ministry in the various settings with a warm invitation that is shaped not by wealth or technology but by vibrant preaching, loving service and peaceable action.

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Nancy Heisey is president-elect of Mennonite World Conference. She will become president after Africa 2003. She teaches biblical studies and church history at Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Va.



Merle Good



MWC photo

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Nzash Lumeya: The growing number of new faces in African, Asian and Latin American local churches challenge a provincial understanding of Christianity. Christian missiologists such as Paul G. Hiebert and David Barrett affirm that more and more women and men from two-thirds world countries are confessing and professing the lordship of Christ Jesus. The good news of Jesus Christ is substantial and trustful, and Christian profession in the Southern continents now outnumbers that in the Northern. Wilbert Shenk affirms this: “Given the more rapid rate of growth outside of the West, membership in Asia, Africa and Latin America, where mission efforts had been concentrated since 1851, surpassed that of the historical heartland in Europe and North America by the end of the 20th century.”

Barrett says personal belief in Jesus, change of lifestyle and belonging to a local church seem to be a trend in Africa. Indeed, the communication of Christ in countries south of the equator has transformed people’s concept of life. They now owe their lives to God. Idols and shrines no longer occupy the central place in a clan or village.

Christ and his Word have become the ultimate reference to Christians. Worshiping Christ together has consolidated the unity and bond of Christians across ethnic, cultural, linguistic and denominational divisions. To attend worship services together is a joyful celebration. Mother tongues are appreciated and used to praise Christ. The cross and resurrection of Jesus are becoming a key to interpret daily life in the light of the Scriptures. Prayer glues and unifies local churches in urban settings.

Sharing the love of Christ within local churches and beyond helps these Christians experience God’s mission to the world. There is a growing missionary movement sweeping our world from churches south of the equator. God is using biblical theological training institutions to equip the saints.

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acles of the Holy Spirit in Africa.

How has and will Anabaptism change as a result?

Heisey: I like to characterize the changes in the global Mennonite and Brethren in Christ family—one of the mainstreams of descendants of 16th-century Anabaptists—as moving from a commitment to our tradition to a commitment to our heritage.

Commitment to Anabaptism as a tradition has focused on the history of the movement in 16th-century central Europe and on learning from those experiences and the models of the early leaders how to follow Christ faithfully. It has also focused on the many traditions that have grown up among the Western European, U.S. and Canadian descendants of those early Anabaptists, including everything from styles of mission activity, structures of organizing the church and formal patterns of educating our youth to ethnic details such as singing in four-part harmony and eating special foods.

This history and these traditions are good—a gift from God—but they don’t necessarily represent faithful Christian living for all the family. So I suggest Anabaptism is changing and will change to an understanding of Anabaptism as a heritage, a well of resources that help believers in many different settings and circumstances to think through the fundamental question, What does it mean to faithfully follow Christ in our environment?

The responses to this question need to be shaped not only by the details of Anabaptism’s past but perhaps even more by the social, economic, religious and political realities of locations where churches are growing. With God’s help many beautiful and vibrant forms of ministry are growing up. We may not look all that much alike, but by our common commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and to following his way of making peace and justice, we will know that we belong to the same heritage.

Lumeya: In the South, most Anabaptist Christians were not exposed to such Anabaptist beliefs as nonviolence, pacifism, simple living and mission. The 1980s and 1990s have been instrumental in fostering a biblical Anabaptist belief anchored in Christ (conversion and faith, baptism and the Lord’s Supper), community and holistic mission.

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For the moment, Anabaptism from the South and Evangelicalism look almost the same theologically.

Leadership and training are going to bring a greater change in the future. Differences may occur in areas such as the daily imitation of Christ as the Prince of Peace. Following him instead of local and national powers may produce persecutions and suffering in the permissive global village (Acts 4; 1 Corinthians 3:11).

Why is it important for Africans to host the Mennonite World Conference assembly in Zimbabwe in August 2003?

Heisey: One simple reason is that it has never been held on that continent before.

Another is that the assembly will provide opportunities for more African Mennonites and Brethren in Christ members to get to know other African brothers and sisters—and being able to exchange directly with those whose contexts are close to their own should enrich the witness of the different African conferences. (Inter-Anabaptist relationships in Africa are not as well developed as in Latin America or in Asia.)

Also it is important for African sisters and brothers to have the opportunity to lead the rest of us in worship, share with us their lives as a faith community and demonstrate for us approaches to mission they are developing.

Lumeya: Every six years we fellowship together. This is one of the ways we express our unity in

Christ and love to one another. This is a time of celebration and praise but also listening to God as we read the Scriptures together and grasp its meaning in a global multicultural context.

Coming together in the name of Christ means we belong to him and to one another. Healthy relationships with Christ and within the extended family of Christ are central for Anabaptists. It is part of world evangelism (John 17:11, 20-26). In going to Zimbabwe, one can visit Anabaptist sisters and brothers from Angola, Burkina Faso, Congo-Brazzaville, Cabinda, Democratic Republic of


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Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Lesotho, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and others.

Why is it important for North Americans to go?

Heisey: The host church in Zimbabwe is living through difficult times, both in terms of political uncertainty and in terms of a serious food shortage. These realities mean that North Americans cannot go lightheartedly to the assembly, as if on a tourist holiday. But it is important for us to join in the witness there to Jesus' way, to support the church with the presence of many Christian brothers and sisters and share in a real sense the suffering they are undergoing.

We in the North have a habit of viewing ourselves as givers and others as receivers. I hope that by attending the assembly we can be receivers of God's grace through the lives and witness of our African sisters and brothers. This does not mean Africans have all the spiritual gifts and Northerners the material gifts to offer each other. Rather, as we go, we offer the gift of solidarity and love and possibly concrete contributions such as fasting or food aid. At the same time we open ourselves to receive hospitality, spiritual nourishment and new insights into faithful living.

Lumeya: Our sisters and brothers from North America and their siblings in Christ who live around the world stand side-by-side through covenantal love. This tough love to follow Christ goes beyond earthly passport. It is part of our commitment to Christ and loyalty to his worldwide body. Going to Zimbabwe is one way to be both local and global followers of Christ. 

What is Mennonite World Conference?

Mennonite World Conference is an international fellowship of Christian churches who trace their beginning to the 16th-century Radical Reformation in Europe. Today more than one million believers belong to this faith family—at least 55 percent are African, Asian or Latin American. MWC represents 87 Mennonite and Brethren in Christ national churches in 60 countries on five continents.

A primary ministry of MWC is to create opportunities—a “space”—where member churches experience communion and solidarity, work together on shared concerns and interests and increasingly become mutually accountable to each other. MWC intends to serve as a global congregation where people of different cultures and nations are no longer strangers.

MWC provides occasions and networks, publications and exchanges where Mennonites and Brethren in Christ can experience fellowship and be encouraged to live and act more faithfully. Though MWC began as a once-in-six-or-seven-years assembly, its major emphases are becoming a growing number of programs and projects that aid member churches in their life and ministry. Increasingly, the initiative and leadership for these activities is coming from the global South.—from *MWC materials*. For more information about MWC, visit www.mwc-cmm.org.