

Mutual aid, mutual accountability

On April 16, 2016, a 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck the Manabi Province of northern Ecuador, killing nearly 600 people and injuring an additional 7,000. Within days of the disaster, two Mennonite conferences in the neighboring country of Colombia joined Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and representatives of Rosedale Mennonite Missions in offering support to several congregations of the Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Ecuatoriana that were severely affected by the earthquake. During the year that followed, additional expressions of support poured in from other Mennonite groups, not just for members of the IEME but for all those affected.

In January, representatives of the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) Deacon's Commission visited the IEME congregations in Manabi to assure them they had not been forgotten.

Expressions of mutual aid like this are not new within our tradition. When the Swiss Brethren were facing persecution and deportation in the 18th century, Dutch Mennonites reached out to offer financial assistance, political advocacy and generous hospitality to hundreds of displaced refugees. By the late 19th century, Mennonites in South Russia had created a host of mutual aid organizations to support the financial needs of orphans, widows and those who had suffered loss by fire. MCC emerged in the 1920s to coordinate the international relief efforts of various Mennonite groups in the United States. And the Amish have developed remarkable networks of generosity to share the costs of medical bills or offer tangible expressions of support when disasters strike.

So when members of the MWC Deacon's Commission arrived in Ecuador, they were participating in a well-established Christian practice that recognizes our deep connection with other brothers and sisters in the church, even those beyond our congregations or national conferences. Mutual aid is part of the DNA of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. It is right to celebrate these expressions of love and support.

But there is another side to the story that quickly becomes more complicated. Mutual aid, after all, is relatively easy. When we share resources with each other—even when that generosity is sacrificial—all parties in the transaction generally feel good.

Mutual accountability, on the other hand, another principle rooted in the DNA of our tradition, is more difficult. At a recent meeting in February,

members of the MWC Faith and Life Commission reflected at length on the part of their mandate that called the commission to “encourage MWC-member churches to develop relationships of mutual accountability—internationally and cross-culturally—in the convictions we hold and the lives we live.” Elsewhere, the commission is mandated to “enable MWC-member churches to receive and give counsel on Anabaptist-Mennonite identity and action [and] matters of Christian faith and practice in general.”

For anyone with even a basic understanding of Anabaptist-Mennonite theology, those words sound right—they echo commitments we make in our baptismal vows and express an ideal that most of us would likely affirm.

At least in the abstract. But unlike the mutual assistance we exchange in times of hardship, the commitment to mutual accountability suggests that the insights and experiences of other groups might have a bearing on our actual beliefs and practices; other groups might have a voice in how we read Scripture or think about the church or our public witness.

Yet instead of regarding this as a potential gift—as an expression of mutual aid—almost always our reaction to mutual accountability is defensive; we assume the other party will be intent on criticizing or changing us. Moreover, the level of vulnerability and trust implied by accountability is hard enough to establish within local congregations; how could this possibly work among groups separated by distance and culture?

Another approach, however, might start, as all meaningful relationships do, by simply being curious about each other. Help me understand how you came to adopt this practice. What led you to this reading of Scripture? What struggles are you facing? What if we thought about mutual accountability not as an exercise in defending ourselves or as an opportunity to set the other party straight but as a space to share our deepest pains and our unresolved questions? The apostle Paul hinted at such a posture when he called on the congregation at Philippi to imitate Christ in a journey of vulnerability (Philippians 2:5-8).

The gifts we have to share with each other go beyond material assistance offered in times of crisis. At its best, mutual accountability invites us to listen attentively, share vulnerably, love deeply and be transformed through our participation in the broken and resurrected body of Christ. TM



John D. Roth is professor of history at Goshen (Ind.) College, director of the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism and editor of *Mennonite Quarterly Review*.

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