Identity unsettled and renewed

In a recent blog post on this magazine's website (www.themennonite.org), Felipe Hinojosa, assistant professor of history at Texas A&M University and author of *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture*, reflected poignantly on the ancient and vexing question of Mennonite identity. "I was born in this church, …" Hinojosa wrote. "I don't call myself a Mennonite because I have some sort of belief system or theological perspective or because I'm anchored to the Confession of Faith. I'm a Mennonite because that's the church that taught me about community and where I grew up going to church with the Solís, Hernández and López families."

Several weeks ago, a conference of German, Dutch, Paraguayan and Russian Mennonites, hosted by the German Mennonite Historical Society, complicated the matter by openly acknowledging that the ethnic forms of communal identity claimed by many German Mennonites in the 1930s and 1940s eased their complicity with the racial ideology of National Socialism. But in the course of my work with Mennonite World Conference, I have encountered many third- and fourth-generation Mennonites in places like Tanzania, Argentina and India—each with their own distinctively "Mennonite" habits, rituals and cultural practices—that didn't look anything like Nazi Germany. And Mennonite Mission Network has long supported indigenous groups in places such as Argentina and Benin that have "enculturated" the gospel in particular ways, albeit quite differently from Mennonites in Germany during World War II or the so-called "ethnic Mennonites" in Lancaster, Pa., Elkhart, Ind., or Newton, Kan.

Our recent internal debates about human sexuality have only sharpened these questions of community and identity. What beliefs and practices are essential to Christian identity with a distinctly Mennonite accent? What is the relative importance of folkways, language, tradition and memory? And who has the appropriate authority to answer these questions?

These issues are not new, of course. The biggest challenge to the survival of the early church was not Roman persecution but the internal struggle among Jewish and Gentile Christians over how to define the future direction of the movement. Indeed, Mennonite identity, like that of the broader Christian church, has always been contested. Appeals to a Golden Age—when doctrines were clear, leadership was decisive and boundaries were firmly fixed—are either naïve or a blatant exercise of power, seeking to silence competing voices.

Yet questions of identity persist. And they cannot be resolved simply by naming their complexity or by the negative paralysis of clarifying what identity is not. Even the postmodern impulse to celebrate the fluidity of identity and the infinite variety of particular stories assumes we nonetheless have something in common.

As those who care about the future of Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite World Conference seek to deepen a sense of community (*koinonia*) within our diverse and far-flung fellowship, it may be helpful to keep several basic principles in mind.

1. We do not create ourselves. With Christians around the world, Mennonites affirm that all of us—indeed all human beings—are made in the image of God, bearing within ourselves an honor and dignity that is not dependent on our virtuous beliefs or deeds or on our class, ethnicity, educational status, gender or sexual orientation.

2. Identity is inevitably embedded in particular cultures. We are always defined in relationships anchored in time and space. We are profoundly shaped by distinctive traditions, languages, bodies and practices that express who we are, both individually and in our communities. Culture is not an end in itself; but neither is it a burden to be transcended. Rather, it is the necessary form within which the divine image finds expression.

3. We are free to make choices. This means that our identity—our beliefs, practices, habits and assumptions—is never merely given or inevitable. The communities that shape us can be celebrated or critiqued. Our distinctive identities can be shared, challenged or renewed as we encounter each other and as we live more fully into the mystery of what it means to be made in the image of God.

Ultimately, members of the body of Christ bear witness to the living presence of God to the extent that we honor the divine image in each other. Not in the form of mere toleration or in some abstract, spiritualized sense. Rather, in the risky practice of truly listening to each other, attentive to alternative ways of inhabiting the world, we open ourselves to the possibility that God is at work in all creation. And in that encounter our own identity may be unsettled and renewed. TM

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