

Sharing Gifts and the Worldwide Mennonite Church

Tim Lind

One. In Ghana there is a small Mennonite church of about 4000 people. In the neighboring country of Burkina Faso there is a much smaller and newer Mennonite church of several hundred members. Two years ago Mennonite World Conference brought a representative group of both churches together in a joint workshop to talk about identifying and sharing gifts in the global church. After the meeting a group of Ghanaian women came to us saying that they wanted to send a delegation to the women of Burkina Faso to teach them how to make gari, which is a method of processing and preserving cassava widely practiced in Ghana but not well known in Burkina.

Two. Many of the African Mennonite/Brethren in Christ churches have Bible schools or colleges for training pastors. In the libraries of these institutions you can find a few old books of northern theological writing – some of them donated by retiring seminary professors in North America. You can't find much at all written by any of the many African theologians; you can't even find much of the considerable writing that has been done over the past three decades – in the form of theses, dissertations, and other writings – by African Mennonite/Brethren in Christ scholars. Mennonite World Conference is working with people in several of these institutions to inventory such works, with a view to eventually finding ways to make them available to African and other theological institutions.

Three. There are well over 400,000 Mennonites/Brethren in Christ in Africa. A very substantial majority of these are women. There is one ordained African Mennonite/Brethren in Christ woman. Last year an inventory was made of all the African Mennonite/Brethren in Christ women who have had some level of theological or bible training. We found that there are about a hundred all together. Subsequently they were given an opportunity to come together in regional groups to discuss common issues and identify concerns regarding their roles in the churches. Finally, a continental meeting of representatives from each region has allowed these women to plan how they want to bring their concerns to church leaders and others.

These are examples of activities that are happening with the support of

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Mennonite World Conference Global Gift Sharing. Global Gift Sharing is an effort by Mennonite World Conference to encourage churches throughout the world to become more aware of their gifts and the gifts of their members, and to facilitate the sharing of these gifts with other churches.

Global Gift Sharing has been initiated as a response to a fundamental paradigm

shift in the global church which is by this time well known; namely the fact that the vast majority of Christians – and for the first time the majority of members of our own denominational family – are from the global South. Today there are substantially more Christians in each of three continents – Africa, Asia, and Latin America – than there are in North America. In the Mennonite/Brethren in Christ family, close to sixty percent of the total membership is in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Despite this shift, there remains a strong and stubbornly entrenched pattern of relationships between churches in the South and in the North, which suggests that little has changed, and which in addition contradicts fundamental biblical beliefs. Specifically, churches in the South are understood as primarily “needy,” while churches in the North are understood as “wealthy.” Churches in the South are understood as “receiving,” and churches in the North as “giving.”

The historical pattern which divides the global church into the “needy” and the “gifted” must be understood as the most damning heresy confronting Christianity today. This is so because it perpetuates a false notion of gifts – and needs – by suggesting that God has created some people who have gifts and others who do not. It divides us in two, and creates deep rooted complexes of superiority and inferiority. It makes some of us feel that we don’t need others at all; and it makes others of us feel that we can do nothing without the initiative of others. It causes some of us to think that sharing the gifts we have is an optional activity that gives us “credit” with God; it causes others to think that we have no gifts worthy of sharing. It gives great honor to certain gifts – such as material wealth and power, while dishonoring and cheapening gifts such as hospitality, certain less lofty skills, and reliance on others.

In contrast to this pattern is the clear Biblical message that all of God’s creation is gifted, and all of us have an essential role to play – and gifts to give – to the whole body, the global church. Every part of the body – of the church, of

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creation – needs every other part. Indeed, the interrelatedness of the varieties of gifts is perhaps one of the clearest statements of God’s redeeming plan for all. The sharing of gifts, by which the needs of all can be met, and by which “abundant life” can flourish, is God’s intention for the world.

There are those who would say that we already know all of this, have known it for a long time, and furthermore, that there are already many examples of activities which are working against this historic pattern. Indeed, this is true; and the examples cited at the beginning of this writing are by no means unique; similar things have been and are being done by churches and congregations, by mission and service agencies. However the issue is not just to do things differently; it is also to articulate clearly and plainly a new understanding – a new paradigm – and to offer better, more comprehensible, more inclusive metaphors for the global church family. Such articulation is lacking, and without it, the critical reality of the global church family (and the need for conferences to discover and put into place structures which reflect their true identity as sisters and brothers in that worldwide family) will continue to be relegated to the status of an interesting but secondary phenomenon.

It is easy – and common – to speak of “our sisters and brothers” in this or that distant place. But the language of family should not be used lightly, without a fuller articulation of what is implied. French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu says that family is a place where “the ordinary laws of the economy are suspended, a place of trusting and giving – as opposed to the market and its exchanges of equivalent values – or to use Aristotle’s term, *philia*, a word that is often translated as ‘friendship,’ but which in fact designates the refusal to calculate.”¹¹⁴ In other words, the family is not the marketplace; it is the natural habitat for gift sharing.

I believe that the concept of sharing gifts in the global family is an articulation that can provide clear and understandable metaphors and directions for future relationships within the global church. It is a theme that is profoundly relational, and that is equally productive at the level of individual members, congregations, conferences, and the worldwide church. It is a theme that is multi-directional and pluralistic, breaking free of historic bilateralism. It is a theme that, above all, lifts up our differences and celebrates them as the very tools – the very gifts – by which our oneness, our unity, can become real.

Throughout the church – in the east and the west, the north and the south – there are many people who are energized and enthusiastic about the idea of having sharing relationships with people who are different from them. This is a great common denominator. However comfortable we may be in our local settings and our

114 Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p65.

own traditions and habits, however materially rich or poor we may be, most of us feel drawn to differences – to those who act, speak, dress, eat, or worship in ways not like our own. Nothing seems to give life to a congregation so much as the possibility of a real relationship with another congregation or other persons or groups whose circumstances are very different from ours.

Where does this energy come from? What is its source? Is it simply from boredom with the everyday, with the usual? I believe in many cases there is something much more profound at play. Could it be that this desire for difference comes from a sub-conscious awareness of what God means for us to be – as individuals, as a church, as a people? Could it be a recognition that we can find fullness and completion in relationship with others who are different, who can offer us the missing pieces of our understanding? Could it be an implicit acknowledgment that we learn more about God and God's purpose when we learn to know those who experience God differently from ourselves? Whatever its source, this energy and enthusiasm for the sharing of our diverse and unique gifts can carry the churches into new patterns of relationships.

In the balance of this writing I will touch briefly on four areas of definition related to the theme of sharing gifts in the global family. These are first, to clarify what is meant by the term “gifts,” second, to reflect on the relationship between gifts and needs, third, to look at the nature of sharing, and finally, to consider gift sharing as modeled by God.

Gifts

In recent years there has been a lively multi-disciplinary debate – involving theologians, philosophers, anthropologists, economists, and poets – about the nature of gift and giving. In light of that discussion it seems presumptuous to treat the gifts in a few short paragraphs. Without presuming to define gift in all its intricacy, I believe that it can be understood in two general categories. First, there is the material world, each element of which is or can be given or received as a gift. This would include the gifts of creation – the world, plants, minerals, animals – as well as all goods (including money) created by human beings from these material gifts given by the Creator.

Second, there are gifts of special capacities or skills, which we also know as

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talents. Among these are the spiritual gifts which the Apostle Paul mentions, but also artistic and musical capacities, and the ability to do almost any task with special skill and/or special love – carpentry, food preparation, business activities, scientific investigation, farming, etc.

Within the framework of these two general categories of gifts there are three characteristics which appear to be true of all different kinds of gifts. First, a gift is something that is *given*; it is something that moves from one person to another. Second, a gift is something given *voluntarily*. If it is forced or required, it can hardly be considered a gift. And third, a gift is something given voluntarily *without regard to compensation*. It is different from something sold or exchanged, where we expect equivalent value in return for what we give.

Gifts are therefore characterized by movement and a certain aspect of freedom. The freedom of the gift is that it is *released* by the giver. In this way a gift can be truly creative – it is able to interact as it will in the new environment of the person who receives it, and thereby become something new. Sometimes we talk about gifts “going astray”; but in a real sense gifts are meant to “go astray.” To release a gift is to empower the receiver, to give him or her something that they can incorporate and use in such a way that their own gifts – not the will or the intentions or the designs of the giver – can in turn be developed and released.

Needs.

Earlier I stated that the way we often divide the world into those who have needs and those who have gifts is highly destructive to all. The relationship between gifts and needs is one of the most critical issues in our consideration of sharing of the gifts God has given to us. This is particularly true in the context of the global church family, which includes on the one hand many people for whom the most basic needs of human survival have been met, and on the other many who struggle daily to meet these same needs.

Typically, gifts and needs are seen as opposites, as the two poles of a continuum. In this view, a need is a request or a question, and a gift is the answer. Again, this polarization leads to a kind of heresy that has been perpetuated for too long – that the world is made up of people with gifts and people with needs. If we believe as a matter of faith that all of creation is “gifted,” that God has not created “ungifted” beings, then we must find another way to understand this relationship. “As a matter of faith” we believe that those who struggle for survival are no less gifted than those who have abundance. What then is the difference between them?

It should be possible for us as a church to agree that some people have – for whatever reasons – been in a position to develop and nurture their gifts, while others

– again, for whatever reasons – have not. In this perspective, needs are not the opposite of gifts, but are much more intimately related. Why do the hungry “need” food and the sick “need” healing? So that the gifts God has endowed them with can be nurtured and can in turn be “given.” Hunger and sickness obstruct gifts. We could say that gifts “need” other gifts in order that they can in turn be given. What we call a “need” then, can in fact be seen as a cry of invitation from a gift that is trapped and cannot be released or given.

It is important that we be clear on this point, for in this those whom we consider “poor,” and those whom we call “rich,” are the same. Those, on the one hand, whose gifts cannot be nurtured, and those, on the other, whose gifts are hoarded, or are otherwise not set free, face the same fundamental dilemma. Their gifts are kept from circulation, and as a result – in the language of Paul – the whole body suffers.

I Corinthians chapter 12 is Paul’s classic statement on gifts. But if we look closely, we see that it is another theme – *need* – that allows us to understand Paul’s whole illustration. It is *mutual need* that binds the many members – all with their unique gifts – into the one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no *need* of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no *need* of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable...

Need, then, can be seen as the vital link between gifts. A need should not be understood as a “lack,” as a simple absence. Needs are “needed” by gifts; they awaken gifts, and function as a kind of gravity which draws gifts and uses them creatively to empower new gifts. Without needs – without use – there can be no gifts. And gifts in turn do not simply “satisfy needs,” rather they release gifts which can in turn seek out other needs. Another way to say it would be that needs are “gifts to gifts,” and gifts are gifts to needs. The relationship is always bi-directional; it allows the resources and potentials of both the “giver” and the “receiver” to become gifts, to be given. To deny need, whether our own or that of the other, is to deny the gifts God has given. Most importantly, it is the dynamic and mutual interplay of gifts and needs that make it possible for many members to be one body.

Sharing

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Our theme is not simply gifts, but *gift sharing*. What is the meaning of “sharing”? In English it has nearly opposite or contradictory definitions. First, there is the sense which implies a division or separation – a property, a company, a sum of money, or even food is divided into *shares*, separated, and distributed to different persons. This is the kind of sharing that the Prodigal Son had in mind when he said to his father, “give me the *share* of the property that will belong to me.” (Luke 15:12) He was asking his father to divide up, to separate.

In contrast, sharing also has the meaning of participating together in a common task, event or undertaking, or participating together in the use of some material thing. An example of sharing in this sense is when we speak of sharing responsibility, sharing leadership, or sharing a meal together. I Corinthians 10:17, which says in part “though we are many, yet we are one body, because we share in the one loaf” is another example of this kind of sharing. Obviously it is in this second sense that we use the term *gift sharing*.

Sharing is different from simply giving or receiving. It is quite possible to give or to receive a gift anonymously. There are many examples of anonymous gifts, particularly in western culture, where anonymous giving is considered of high merit. But *anonymous sharing* is impossible. Sharing gifts is not an end in itself, nor is it primarily about making everyone more equal or leveling the playing field. Rather sharing is about building up the interrelatedness of the body – in this context, the church. This interrelationship of the different parts of the body is important so that the body can do its work, fulfill its purpose.

To say this in another way, what we feel is important today in the global church family is the development of a sense of real inter-relatedness among the different parts of the family; parts which are separated by geography, history, culture, language, race and many other factors. We need to become more real, more connected, to each other; not simply so we can have warm family feelings toward each other, but so we can empower our respective gifts to further God’s purpose, God’s vision for the world. It is through the *sharing* of gifts that relationships can be built, nurtured, and strengthened.

Indeed, we might consider whether it is not *only* through gift sharing that relationships can come about. If we reflect on our own close relationships, we will probably find that the sharing of gifts has been a crucial factor in all of them. Can we imagine a relationship without gifts? In our relationships with our friends, our spouses, our parents, our children, our neighbors – the sharing of gifts is always central to their growth and development.

It is sharing, then, that carries the relational theme when we think about gifts and how they are used. When gifts are shared (rather than simply “given”) the world

of the giver and the world of the receiver are made to overlap. Sharing implies that all of the parties involved become mixed up, and are a part of – or belong to – what is being done.

For this reason, material gifts are easy to give, but difficult to share – they are too mobile, too easily separated from the giver, from relationship. And of all the material gifts, money is the most mobile, the most detachable, and therefore the least “relational.” This is because money is always a substitute; in general it *represents* value rather than having any value itself. As a substitute for some material thing or things, for some service or potential service, it is disconnected and mercurial. Because money does not easily carry relational value, both givers and receivers often are made to feel uncomfortable with restrictions and designations placed on its use.

On the other hand the immaterial gifts share well because they cannot be easily separated from the receivers and givers; the worlds of both inevitably overlap – and are shared – when the gift is given and received. If you are a skilled woodworker, or teacher, or singer, or cook, when you give your skills as a gift they cannot be separated from you, and are thus much more likely to be relational.

God’s Gift Sharing

In virtually every religion gods are ontologically associated with giving. Marvin Olasky states that “Cultures build systems of charity in the image of the God they worship, whether distant deist, bumbling bon vivant, or ‘whatever goes’ gopher.”¹¹⁵ The giving of the God of the Bible can best be understood as *sharing*. This is demonstrated in the two great gift stories of the Bible. The first is the story of creation in Genesis.

We might begin by asking in what sense creation is a gift, an act of sharing, on the part of God. One could argue, to the contrary, that the creation of the universe, the world, and life itself simply represented an extension of God’s domain, that the creation was the enhancement of what belonged to an omnipotent God, in the same way that the owner of a property might develop it by building a house on it or by improving the soil, or by planting trees.

115 Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1992), p. 8.

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Genesis 1:28-30 is the very first occasion in the Bible where creation – specifically human creation – is addressed directly by the Creator. The language of these verses is clearly a language of giving, of gift:

God blessed them [humankind], and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.”

Many different things can be done – and have been done – with this passage. But to begin with, it seems significant that in the biblical account, the whole history of interaction between God and humans begins with a declaration of gifts. In verse 28, God “gives” dominion. This is followed by the verse that begins “See, I have given you...”, noting specific gifts to humans, while verse 30 notes God’s gifts to other living creatures.

What can we conclude from this creation account followed by God’s initial “gifting” communication with creation? Let us consider several points.

First, creation is the creative work of God, it is God’s ingenuity. By beginning with the creation accounts the Bible makes the point that everything *comes forth from* God. All matter, all life, results from God’s creative work. Creative work is different from just plain work, from simple production; in particular it is different because it contains within it an ingenuity that comes directly from the creator, and that comes uniquely from the creator. Creation is not simply an assembly of parts; it involves an aspect – what we could call the “spirit” – of the creator. Thus we can say that everything that is, is “of God.”

Historically Christians have taken the creation account to mean – among other things – that everything is owned by God; that God is the proprietor of all that is. Psalm 24 seems to make this point:

The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.

We do not want to in any way call into question this aspect of ownership. But we suggest that our preoccupation with the proprietary aspect of God’s relationship to creation may reflect a cultural bias that obscures an equally important but different sense in which creation “belongs to” God. This is that all of creation

contains God’s spirit, God’s creative genius. Creation is “of God,” and God is in it.

Seen from this perspective of “belonging to,” we can better understand humankind’s dominion over “every living thing that moves upon the earth.” The word “dominion” implies a very strong ownership – dominance, supremacy, ascendancy – even “absolute” ownership. It seems clear that God is giving to humans something more than a mere caretaker role. But this dominion is qualified by the fact that the earth and all that is in it, “every living thing that moves upon the earth,” is of God and contains God’s spirit within it, just as human beings themselves, as a part of creation, are of God. Thus nothing can ultimately be alienated from God, and human dominion is qualified by ongoing relatedness and interrelationship.

A second point that can be made based on the Genesis 1 passage is that creation is always of necessity “offered up,” released; it must go out from the creator. A creation is something that is born into a wider environment. In the biblical creation accounts, the mind of God – the purpose of God – the creativity of God – is born into the universe.

In this sense creation is inevitably given (and received). Any work of art, for example, is given up when it is displayed. This doesn’t necessarily mean that the artist no longer owns it, but a displayed work of art opens itself to diverse influences and uses beyond the artist herself or himself. Others can receive it, and be changed by it, be moved by it, use it, and modify it, regardless of whether they physically own it.

The third insight from the Genesis 1 accounts is that creation is given to all; not just to all human beings – which is in itself a revolutionary idea – but also to “everything that has the breath of life.” In this we can see the “genesis” of the Biblical view of sharing. We might be tempted to understand verses 29 and 30 as supporting the more restrictive understanding of “share,” that of dividing up, separating, allocating – this part is given to human beings, and this part to other life forms. But a more careful look will show that what is really at issue is a more complex interconnectedness which supports the “relationship” meaning of sharing. All of life depends upon each other.

This brings us to our final observation, that creation is about inter-relatedness. Let us note the specific sequences of the Genesis 1 creation account.

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First, God created light, and separated it from darkness. Light is the first gift, and we know how closely related light is to all of life. The second gift is the sky – the atmosphere – followed by the seas and the land. The gifts of vegetation, creatures of the sea, the air, the land, and finally humans follow.

The great truth of both the most modern science and the most primitive religion is that everything is interrelated and interconnected. To say it differently, everything is in a “gift sharing” relationship with everything else. In God’s creation there is no possibility of alienation or separation. Alienation – withdrawal from the sharing relationship – is certain death. Manna is given to be used; when it is withdrawn into the realm of private ownership it becomes rotten. God’s purpose as expressed in creation is that gifts be shared.

The second great gift story of the Bible is of course the Jesus story, and in many ways it parallels the creation story. The initial verses of the gospel of John link Jesus to God, but also to creation:

He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What came into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The language of “new creation” in II Corinthians 5:17 is similar:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

John 3:16 shows that Jesus is to be understood as the creative work of God and that He is given as a gift to all creation:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Our point in citing these stories is that they are stories of gift sharing, not simply gift giving. The fact that human life was created *in the image of God*, with God's own breath, shows that God didn't simply give the gift of life and the universe in a detached way, as though it were a machine that would do its own thing. Rather God is from the beginning in relationship with creation; God's spirit was in the gift. The Jesus story is even more explicit on this point. Through Jesus, the "word became flesh, and dwelt among us." And the whole story of God's interaction with people is a story of God's desire to stay in relationship despite the human tendency toward alienation, expropriation, and separation.

The Biblical foundation of gift sharing rests on these stories, which together are the archetype for gift sharing. On the one hand, God's spirit remains in the creative work of creation. This doesn't mean that God's gifts have strings attached, rather it means simply that God cannot be alienated from the material and other gifts we receive, and that in receiving them we enter into a relationship with God. On the other hand it also means that what God has given us is not ours to possess, to alienate, but to share in turn. God did not create a divided-up, parceled-out world, a world of separated, independent entities. Instead God invites us to use our diverse gifts to build and reinforce the oneness of creation and the oneness of the body of Christ. Sharing gifts is the model God has given us for nurturing relationships; it is the way to abundant life.

Throughout our family, in very diverse cultures and societies and churches, in the North as in the South, people long for relatedness to others. Congregations want to be in relationship with congregations that are different from them. There is a strong desire for sharing relationships. This is the motivating force for gift sharing. The hope for the global church family is that we recognize that all of its parts are gifted parts, that we find structures and approaches to facilitate sharing, and that we actively welcome and nurture the gifts of others even as we share our own gifts.

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