Arnold Neufeldt-Fast
Wesley United, W-Stouffville
November 25, 2018
OT: 2 Sam 23:1-7
NT: Rev. 1: 4-8

The Old Testament reading has the last words of King David; he looks back, praises God, the Rock of Israel, who has made an everlasting covenant with Israel and who promises to "stand by" Israel and make it prosper.

This morning I too want to look back as a way for us to praise God for the way he has stood by our respective "houses" or denominations, and promises to remain true to his covenant promises.

My Background

I appreciate the invitation to speak to you about the Mennonites. I believe the invitation first came via the Hon. Jane Philpott, MP, who is a member of our congregation, Community Mennonite Stouffville. I am ordained member in our denomination, and teach theology at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto, where I am Associate Academic Dean.

In the past months I've had the pleasure to work more closely with one of your newer, local United Church community ministers, Bri-Anne Swan. For six years I was on the Canadian Council of Churches, where I represented my denomination, and also worked quite closely with Gail Allen, my United Church counterpart.

Bri-Anne, Gail and I know that our two denominations have an eye for society's ills, and feel called to speak up and advocate, even politically if necessary, on many issues of social justice—as was the case a century ago

with the temperance movement in Canada, for example. At the beginnings of both of our traditions is a confidence that believers by God's grace can and must work effectively toward their own betterment and the betterment of society.

John Wesley famously said that Christianity is "essentially a social religion," not a "solitary religion,"[1] that is, we need to walk together, and our faith should be evidenced in this broken world. Prayer, Bible study go hand in hand with feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, helping the stranger, visiting the sick or imprisoned. Menno Simons used the word "discipleship," Wesley "perfectionism."

All of this simply points to the fact that our churches share in common some important ways of reading scripture, asking similar questions with a similar commitment to obedience.

Whitchurch-Stouffville

Locally, Mennonites and Wesleyans—now United Church—have lived very closely since the early 1800s.[2]

When the Methodist saddlebag preachers came to Jonathan Petch's log chapel at this site built in 1840, they knew it as "Hacking's Corners" for the Congregationalist minister Rev. James Hacking, and his son who remained to clear the forests here. Before that time, Methodists met for worship in their own homes—so too the Mennonites in the Stouffville and Markham area.

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[1] For these seems, see the excellent article by Howard A. Snyder, "John Wesley and the Radical Protestant Tradition," *The Asbury Seminarian*.

[2] See the J. Barkey, ed., *Whitchurch Township* (1993), https://cdm22007.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p22007coll8/id/406189/rec/9.

Both of our traditions found that appropriate, because their understanding of church was focused on the people, not the building where they met. Both began locally and historically largely as a "lay movement" involving unordained members in a variety of leadership and ministry roles. Both of our congregations continue this tradition.

When your first meeting house was built, men set on one side and women on the other. So too the Mennonites. You argued mightily over your first organ in 1880, with some who were adamant that an instrument does not belong in the house of God. The Mennonites would have said the same; for both traditions, it was and remains important not to lose sight of the "primitive" first-century church and its patterns for worship, service, and ministry. While respecting historical developments, it belongs to our common DNA to seek and recover and restore in some important ways the patterns of the early church.

Speaking of DNA, it is not surprising there was intermarriage between our groups from the beginning. The founders of Stouffer-ville and Reesor-ville, today Stouffville and Markham, were Pennsylvania Mennonites. Abraham Stouffer's wife Elizabeth Reesor, and her brother Peter Reesor, the founder of Markham and other Mennonites, Quakers (Newmarket/Uxbridge) and Dunkers (BIC, in Gormley) arrived here from the US because they were offered militia exemption from John Graves Simcoe. These were historic peace churches--which simply means that the struggled mightily with the Christian response to war. "Nonresistance" was the conclusion the Mennonites drew on the question, What was the ethic of the early Christian centuries towards the enemy?, and they have tried to live out that conviction.

In times of war, roughly a third to a half of Mennonite youth left their congregations in Canada when--in good Christian conscience—they felt they could not agree with the Mennonite tradition on this point. Church-wise, these Mennonites often landed with the Methodists, who had a similar spirituality and emphasis on holiness, even though they differed on the question of military participation.

David Reesor, a nephew to Abraham Stouffer and Peter Reesor, became well known as a Lieutenant-Colonel of the Reserve Militia in York, and later magistrate, reeve and then appointed to the first Canadian senate. He married into a prominent Methodist family.[3]

Today, the Government House Leader in the Senate, Peter Harder, is a member of the United Church of Canada, but he speaks proudly of his Mennonite formation and family history.[4] My grandfather and his grandfather grew up not so far from each other in a Mennonite colony in South Russia, today Ukraine! While government is not church, Harder strives to allow his faith and beliefs to animate his actions, especially with respect to social issues, like immigration.

Mennonites and Charles Wesley

Mennonites love to sing and Mennonite congregations still use hymnals and most even know how to sing in parts! Our newest hymnal has 24 hymns by Charles Wesley; the previous hymnal had 28.

- What would Advent be without "Come, thou long-expected Jesus"?

[3] "David Reesor," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Reesor.
[4] Peter Harder, "I am proud of my roots," *Canadian Mennonite* https://www.canadianmennonite.org/stories/%E2%80%98i-am-proud-my-roots%E2%80%99.

- What would Christmas be without "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"?
- What would Easter Sunday be without "Christ the Lord is risen today".
- What would a season of worship be without "Oh for a thousand tongues", or without the invocation: "Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of Heav'n to earth come down"?
- How could we reflect on our own death, without the hymn "Jesus lover of my soul"?

All of these hymns by the brother to John Wesley, Charles, have been in North American Mennonite hymnals for a very, very long time, and will be sure to be part of our hymnody for generations to come.

But John Wesley has also influenced our singing. A Mennonite hymnal handbook published in 1949[5] included John Wesley's "Rules for Singing":

- learn the tunes;
- sing exactly as printed;
- sing all the hymns;
- sing lustily and with good courage;
- sing modestly (be attentive to harmony; strive to unite voices together)
- sing in tune;
- above all, sing spiritually (have an eye to God in every word you sing).

The Wesleys have renewed the faith of Mennonites in different seasons of life, different seasons of the church year, over generations.

Mennonites and John Wesley

[5] *Handbook to the Mennonite Hymnary* (Newton, KS: 1949), xxxix.

When I first began at Tyndale Seminary, the then Chair of Wesley Studies said to me, "Arnold, John Wesley told his ministers they 'must be ready to pray, preach or die at a moment's notice.'" I thought, oh, Wesley must have learnt that from the Mennonites! Who knows, but here's a story relating Menno Simons, whom our movement was named after, and John Wesley.

For more than a millennium re-baptism, or *Ana*-baptism, or re-baptism, was one of two heresies punishable by death in Christian Europe. In the sixteenth-century there were Anabaptist movements in Switzerland, South Germany, parts of Austria, Strasbourg, and especially in the Low Countries: Belgium and The Netherlands.

They had a vision of church that differed from the medieval church, but also from that of Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin. They called for voluntary membership marked by adult baptism upon confession of faith, which meant, in effect that in the first generation or two they re-baptized new believers. Consequently, they became one of the most persecuted groups of the Protestant Reformation.

Anabaptists, later named as follower of Menno Simons, sought to gather a people who desired to "walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ." The Apostle Paul spoke of being "buried with Christ" in baptism and raised with him in faith (Colossians 2:12), so that "we too might walk in the newness of life" (Romans 6:4). In this spirit, Menno Simons entitled his first published pamphlet after his renunciation of the papal church in 1536 "The Spiritual Resurrection." For Menno, to walk in the resurrection meant putting away the old person of sin and putting on the new person of holiness, and a way of life

marked by love toward all people. For Menno and his movement, voluntary adult baptism was the marker of this commitment.

While John Wesley did not reject infant baptism, he made a very similar point with annual covenant services as a means of renewing personal commitments. While Menno and Wesley had great respect for Luther and the Reformation, they each thought in different ways that Luther did not go far enough in reforming aspects of the church, especially with expectation around sanctification or growth in holiness in this life, that God graciously enables us to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in his work of salvation.[6]

One month after John Wesley's famous "Aldergate Experience," where he says "I felt my heart strangely warmed [and] I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation," he crossed the English Channel to meet with Pietists on the continent, and one of his first stops was at the home of a well-known Mennonite pastor in Amsterdam, Johannes Deknatel, where he stayed for six days.

Like Wesley, Deknatel had been deeply shaped by the Moravian Brotherhood at Herrnhut and their benefactor Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf, another great hymn writer and renewer of the church. Wesley joined Deknatel for one of the renewal group meetings, or societies.

> [June 1738] … in Amsterdam which, according to Wesley, was "the pleasantest city which" he had "ever seen. Here we were entertained, with truly Christian hospitality, by Mr. Decknatel, a Minister of the Mennonists, who suffered us to want nothing while we stayed here, which was till Thursday following. … Remember them, O Lord, for good! [Mon. June 17] I was at one of the societies, which lasted an hour and a half. About sixty persons were present. The singing was in Low-

[6] For more, see H. Snyder (above).

> Dutch; (Mr. Decknatel having translated into Low-Dutch, part of the Hernhuth Hymn-book;) … the expounding was in High-Dutch.[7]

Deknatel and Wesley both experimented with the idea of societies or self-conscious Christian small groups or "cells" for the revival of their larger churches, something they both learnt from the Moravians and their friend Zinzendorf in Herrnhut, where Wesley would spend the next three months.

What is the gift of this shared tradition? Today, both of our churches remain convinced of the church's social mandate, about Christian discipleship, the active role of the laity, and the importance of a covenanted community, returning to scripture and listening to the spirit.

In both of our traditions—in the Methodist movement which joined the United Church, and the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement, there is constant evolution and adaptation in response to the renewing work of God's Spirit and the changing context in which the church is located.

What is our shared Christian calling in the context of Whitchurch-Stouffville, York Region, the Province of Ontario, the Dominion of Canada—or on the Oak Ridges Moraine, the Lake Simcoe watershed, on the historical lands of the Wendat and Anishinaabe?

Holiness for Wesley was never merely an individual matter, but "concerns one's relationships," to God; to one's brothers and sisters in Christ, to the broader community, and one should add today, to God's creation as well. Mennonites would agree completely, that holiness is essential, but should not be individualized or privatized.

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[7] *The Journal of John Wesley,* ed.by John Mason, 1829, no. 1, vol. 1, p. 109. https://books.google.ca/books?id=UK887w1QNqgC&lpg= .

This is the gift that our traditions share. When we are at our best, we ask how we can embody Jesus' countercultural approach; we ask, what action might we take together to make this world closer to Jesus' kingdom? That we make this question important and central is the spiritual gift that God has nurtured in our churches over generations, and which we are invited to continue to share with the broader church.

It is fitting to reflect on this as we close off the Christian year today, the last Sunday in the church calendar, sometimes called Christ the King Sunday. We look back on how God's kingdom has broken in here and there even through our small efforts. We give praise to Christ the king and are also grateful for the great cloud of witnesses that have gone on before us.

Jesus says, "I am the Alpha and Omega," the beginning and the end, "says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev 1:8).

And now, after looking back, we are ready to look forward with eager anticipation to Advent and Christmas, to rediscover this king in a babe, in a lowly manger, and to the renewal that God promises—even to you and to me. "To him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen" (Rev. 1:6).