

## **RESPONDING TO THE GAZA CRISIS AS PEACE CHURCHES:**

### **Seeking the Mind of Christ**

Special Guest Dr. Tom Yoder Neufeld

Grace Mennonite Church, St. Catharines, July 6, 2024

Contextual Preamble, by Laurence Steven

The history of the Mennonite / Anabaptist communion over the past century and a half reveals swings along a spectrum from being “apart” to being “engaged” (Harry Heubner’s words referenced in Esther Epp-Tiessen’s *Pursuing Peace: The Essence of Mennonite Central Committee*, Winnipeg: MCC Canada, 2009; p. 24). We maintained our communities apart from the “world” in order to ensure their purity and enable obedience to God’s word. Yet there was repeated pressure to engage with this “world” as we followed the example and mission of Jesus. Mennonite Central Committee, for example, started as a relief organization for Mennonites in Russia and Ukraine in the 1920s, and then through the 2<sup>nd</sup> WW. Yet this very act of reaching out to our own across the world, inevitably gave MCC a broader, more expansive view of Christian engagement with that world. During the 1950s after the Korean War MCC shifted to looking outward beyond the broad Mennonite family to whomever needed assistance. In the 1960s there was further change in MCC, from relief to proactive peacemaking in response to calls from younger members who saw the global protests over the Vietnam War as calling out our understanding of peace as a matter of justice. Jean Hilborn, winner of MCC Canada’s peace speech contest in 1967 caught the spirit of the times by quoting Martin Luther: “A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing.”

Two decades later Ron Sider spoke to the Mennonite World Conference in Strasbourg, France in 1984. [ <https://cpt.org/sider> ] In response to the binary view of isolationist pacifism on the one hand and worldly militarism on the other Sider said “there is always a third option. We can always prayerfully and nonviolently place ourselves between the weak and the oppressor. Do we have the courage to move from the back lines of isolationist pacifism to the front lines of nonviolent peacemaking?” He made a startling and blunt call to the peace churches: “Unless we Mennonites and Brethren in Christ are ready

to start to die by the thousands in dramatic vigorous new exploits for peace and justice, we should sadly confess that we really never meant what we said.” Out of the ferment Sider’s speech created, Community Peacemaker Teams (CPT) was born in 1986.

And now, almost 40 years further on, we have the founding of the grassroots group Mennonite Action, in response to the ongoing unparalleled catastrophe in Gaza. Here is their mission statement:

**“We are people of God’s peace.** Mennonite Action is a movement of Mennonites bonded by a common belief that we must be public about our peace values. We believe that Mennonites have a responsibility to use our voices as powerfully as possible for the cause of peace and justice. We are taking public action as Mennonites. We are mobilizing Mennonites across the US and Canada to demand a ceasefire, end the US and western funded occupation of Palestine, and build for lasting peace.”

Mennonite and Anabaptist students, with support from Mennonite Action have set up an encampment on the University of Waterloo campus, demanding the university call for a ceasefire and divest from businesses supporting Israel. The university is suing them for 1.5 million dollars.

So, how do we respond to these crises, and to the strident calls for us to *act*? Well, one way is what we are doing today. In its “Resolution on Palestine and Israel” [ <https://www.commonword.ca/ResourceView/82/19084> ] the Mennonite Church Canada Delegate Assembly in 2016 resolved as follows:

- We look to the gospel of Jesus Christ for guidance and grace in our responses to the Palestine and Israel context;
- We commit ourselves to ongoing prayer, searching, and discernment concerning the ways in which we as congregations, communities, and church members are impeding or facilitating, ignoring or promoting, the quest for a just peace between Palestinians and Israelis.

It is in this spirit that we have invited Dr. Tom Yoder Neufeld to speak with us today.