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Further on The Question of Denominations...

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The response from pastors to my last reflection about denominations was immediate and very positive. It seemed to hit a chord. My basic point was that characterizing the existence of Christian denominations as evidence of the failure of the church, and as “passé, anti-ecumenical, egotistic, competitive, rigid, with tunnel vision, and/or are simply unacceptable in our post-modern world” does not need to be the final word. There are ways of understanding denominational presence in a more positive and gracious light (see www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1177.)

But we do need to acknowledge clearly that denominations have not always travelled the high road in the calling that is ours. To this day, the Catholic and Orthodox traditions do not acknowledge as “church” those groups that are not in “full communion” with them, which includes all Protestants. We were told in the Mennonite World Conference Assembly in Paraguay last summer that Mennonites were the only denomination that considered the African Initiated Churches (now over 60,000,000 strong) as expressions of the body of Christ and not as sects. But we have our own stories to tell. We, too, have rejected and shunned other expressions of Christian faith that did not share our distinctive theological understandings. And we have separated ourselves from the circles of dialogue where healthier sharing and understanding could have been generated.

In spite of the plethora of failures, we must resist the temptation to base our calling on a foundation of our failures. We don’t do this in other areas of life. For example, we do not change the rules of scoring just because a football team failed to get a touchdown. We do not negate the importance of parenting because of the many examples of parents abusing their own children. We do not reject an ethic of non-violence because it has resulted in the

martyrdom of some, and wars persist. In other words, we do not deny grace and the need for salvation because of the continued presence of sin and evil all around us.

We try to organize our goals according to what we hope for, not only according to what already is. The *vision* for the church and denomination must spring out of what the *calling/vocation* is meant to be, i.e., we hope not to end up where we are now. The *strategies* for how we move toward the *vision* must begin with the realities we face, i.e., we cannot start from where we are not.

All of this, of course, keeps pointing us back to the same thing. That is the critical need to understand and embrace the all-encompassing vocation for the church and God’s people as imagined and pointed to in our scripture. It is important for members of our churches to be inspired and motivated by this God-given vocation. And, yes, it is critically important for our leaders and pastors to be inspired and motivated by the vocation of the peoplehood that we are leading.

This later statement may sound strange, but it is true that those who are most deeply immersed (e.g., pastors and leaders) in the nitty-gritty (sometimes ugliness) of the church are the ones most at risk to become most disenchanted with the lofty vocation for the church as sketched in the New Testament. Pastors, at times, can be among the most cynical about imaginative ecclesiology.

Whether our vocational venue is the congregation, the Area Church, or the national Denomination, reasons for discouragement abound. But so do reasons for hope.

We need to hear the reasons “for the hope that is in us,” and we need to hear them over and over again.