

# Decolonizing the Mennonite Mind

By Johann Funk

Reconciliation is at the center of Christian vocation captured by Jesus as *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these”* (Mark 12:30-31). Christendom<sup>1</sup> including mainline and North American Evangelical churches have addressed right relationships with God with several individualist formulations – child baptism, evangelistic rallies, and the Four Spiritual Laws – but struggles with the social implication of being Christian. The question, *“the expert in the law . . . asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”* (Luke 10: 29) continues to be unresolved in Christendom with tragic consequences: Holy Wars, the Doctrine of Discovery, settler colonialism, denominational exclusivity, and theological controversy.

For Christians to purposefully and effectively *‘Love your neighbor as yourself’* requires a decolonizing of our minds. Jesus cuts across the barriers of class, culture, sex, and status to demonstrate God’s inclusive love for all of creation. He possesses a thoroughly decolonized mind rendering the question of “who is our neighbour?” redundant. All of humanity is our neighbour, loved by God, and deserving of our love.

Here are ten positions for Mennonites to consider on the path through symbolic reconciliation<sup>2</sup> to transactional reconciliation<sup>3</sup> and finally transformative reconciliation<sup>4</sup> with Indigenous neighbours confident that in a democratic country like Canada the people lead and the courts and legislatures inevitably follow:

1. Acknowledge Mennonite alliances with settler colonialism. Wherever Mennonites found freedom from religious persecution they have consistently displaced Indigenous populations: Ukraine, Canada, USA, Paraguay, Mexico, Brazil, etc. in concert with colonial governments’ objectives.<sup>5</sup>
2. Recognize that Mennonite prosperity is largely a product of privileges arising from their self-serving agreements with colonial powers combined with a measure of resilience, community solidarity, and hard work.<sup>6</sup>
3. Repent of our colonized minds and pivot our privilege and resources towards intentional acts of conciliation with our Indigenous neighbours.
4. Build on the resolutions adopted by Mennonite Church delegate bodies attempting to chart a path to conciliation with Indigenous peoples.<sup>7</sup>
5. Respectfully and gratefully acknowledge that Mennonites live on the traditional and ancestral land of Indigenous nations to which Indigenous nations retain sovereignty since time immemorial.
6. Applaud Indigenous revitalization of languages and cultures that strengthen indigenous identity and resolve to express their right to self-determination.
7. Listen to the Indigenous voices calling for dignity and justice as a precondition for conciliation between equals. Affirm and support the growing body of articulate

Indigenous spokespersons: Knowledge Keepers, Elders, lawyers, politicians, professors, writers, singers, actors in the vanguard of Indigenous revitalization.

8. Support Indigenous efforts to assert their rights enshrined in treaties or in defence of their sovereignty over unceded traditional territories through nonviolent actions (Land Back, Wet'suwet'en, etc.).
9. Recognize Indigenous people's intimate relationship to the land and their considerable efforts to preserve its biodiversity. Indigenous people are in the vanguard of climate action (Water Protectors, etc.). "[A] new report shows that **Indigenous communities resisting the more than 20 fossil fuel projects analyzed have stopped or delayed greenhouse gas pollution equivalent to at least 25 percent of annual U.S. and Canadian emissions.**"<sup>8</sup>
10. Resist colonial assumptions of presumptive sovereignty to control the conditions for conciliation through legislative procedures. Insist that the Canadian and Provincial governments proceed with the implementation of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples legislation in good faith by denouncing the Doctrine of Discovery and *terra nullius* enshrined in settler colonialism in face-to-face and nation-to-nation talks.

While the goal is relating to Indigenous peoples "in a good way," Mennonites need to do the hard and often painful internal work of decolonizing our minds.<sup>9</sup> Will the question of who is our neighbour find resolution as an expression of our love for God and His Son who demonstrated the life of a decolonized mind?

#### Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> My definition of Christendom includes North American Evangelicalism whose origins have retained nationalist and political qualities replacing mainline religious institutions as a quasi-state religion. Mennonites, by uncritically adopting North American Evangelicalism, absorbed many of the qualities of their co-religionists.

<sup>2</sup> SYMBOLIC RECONCILIATION-exploring the urgent need for reconciliation between Indigenous and settler populations

- Acknowledging historical racism, oppression, discrimination
- Validating the voices and struggles of Indigenous peoples
- Participating in Blanket Exercises to grasp the history and legacy of colonization
- Repudiating the 'Doctrine of Discovery'
- Making formal apologies
- Acknowledging settler privilege
- Making formal land acknowledgements
- Participating in reconciliation walks

<sup>3</sup> TRANSACTIONAL RECONCILIATION-putting knowledge into reconciling actions

- Being knowledgeable and effective allies of Indigenous peoples
- Harnessing settler privilege in the interest of creating a truly just society
- Supporting Indigenous people's struggle for social, political, legal and economic justice
- Effectively responding to the 'Calls to Action' in the TRC
- Advocating for the implementation of UNDRIP in Canadian law

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<sup>4</sup> TRANSFORMATIVE RECONCILIATION-the decolonization of Indigenous and settler societies

-embracing a paradigm shift

-A complete healing of the broken relationships between Indigenous and settler peoples

-The realization of social, legal, political and economic justice called for in the Canadian Charter of Rights

<sup>5</sup> Mennonites arriving in the Fraser Valley at a time [1927] when the production of hops was undergoing massive expansion. The need for new workers was acute. Work in the hop yards provided much needed income for many Mennonite families. Mennonites replaced Indigenous hop pickers who till then were the main labour force when it was decided that an “all-white picking force would be more efficient and economical than an all-native or mixed force.” (Chilliwack Progress, June 2 , 1926, p.1)

<sup>6</sup> “Since the late 16th century Mennonites in various countries have received official documents from rulers or governments defining their rights or privileges with respect to specific issues, usually including release from military service and from the swearing of oaths. Since the late 19th century, schools, language, mutual (aid) insurance, and the Mennonite inheritance system have been added to the contents of a requested Privilegium.” An index of agreements follows.

[https://gameo.org › title=Privileges \(Privilegia\)](https://gameo.org › title=Privileges (Privilegia))

“Whose Neighbour Am I? Treaty One and Mennonite Privilegium”

<https://youtu.be/296U7cVHRb4>

<sup>7</sup> Steve Heinrichs & Esther Epp-Tiessen eds., *Be it Resolved: Anabaptists & Partner Coalitions Advocate for Indigenous Justice*, 1966-2020, Mennonite Central Committee & Mennonite Church Canada, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> <https://iearth.org/indigenous-resistance-against-carbon>

<sup>9</sup> Or a more complete discussion of the topic see Elaine Enns & Ched Myers, *Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization*, Wipf and Stock, 2021.