

In the Belly of a Paradox: Reflections on the Dubious Service of Reflecting on Service

Gerald W. Schlabach

Mennonites have had perhaps the most substantial experience of any Protestant tradition in the deployment of people for service – over against more conventional missionary work. Yet we have failed to produce one single monograph which could be called a theology of service. Some of us have speculated that this datum in itself says something important.

-Wilbert R. Shenk¹

Once upon a time I was young – young, but perhaps not young enough. Twenty-six, a student of Mennonite history, a product of Goshen College,² a protégé of the Mennonite Central Committee’s executive secretary through two years of weekly meetings, a seer of the “Anabaptist Vision,”³ and a would-be practitioner of the “Politics of Jesus,”⁴ I thought I could speak for a tradition, even amid a revolution. I thought I could write the first Mennonite theology of service. I thought service could be written.

What follows is a confession of sorts. Like any confession, it is deeply rooted in one particular story. Yet I hope it is also a catholic story. After all, “catholic” really does not mean *universal* except as an eschatological longing for the day “when God will be all in all” and we find that God has woven all our stories into the one story of Christ’s Church. Short of the eschaton, Christians are already catholic as they recognize one another to be witnessing truthfully (though always partially) to the God of Jesus Christ, out of their particular stories, across locales, across time.⁵ The story that follows, then, tells of embracing the gifts of other Christian traditions more widely precisely,

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by living out my own tradition most deeply. Its catholic hope is that there are also gifts here for others to embrace.

As a confession, what follows is no less about sin because it is also about gifts. Eventually I did write “a monograph which could be called a theology of service.” If sales are any indication of the success of my book, *To Bless All Peoples*,⁶ then I may have to confess failure of the most abject kind. More seriously, renewing my reflection on service with this present paper again risks the very sin it will worry about – that the act of writing about service may serve as rationalization for failing to serve. From this dilemma I have no sure escape but God’s mercy. I can at least assure the reader that what will be most painful about my confession is that I discourage students from using the first-person singular, yet I violate that rule here. In the very failure of words, confession may at last take its most truthful shape, giving way and pointing beyond itself to praise of God.

In any case, the pretense was not mine alone. At many points, the story of the Mennonite Central Committee has been a story of audacious young men and women who have gone out into our bloody, turbulent, and arrogant world not so much with expertise as with a certain intangible gift of character – something that has not been their own production but the product of their communities and their inheritance. With a strange mixture of subjective humility and objective brashness, MCC workers have regularly gone into war zones – and into zones of cultural, social, economic, or religious complexity. With just enough naivete to serve them well, they have (at their best) immersed themselves in local communities and become expert in the dignity, suffering, and potential of those communities – often surpassing by far the expertise of technocrats. This they have done because they have had a communion of churches behind and before them.

Theology of service is part of what has made all this possible. But there is a catch. Mennonite theology of service has not so much been written as interwoven into practices of mutual aid, into alternatives to military service, into ways of hospitality, and – if written at all – it has appeared in articles and pamphlets ostensibly about *other* matters. “War, peace, and nonresistance.” “Discipleship.” “Concern.” “Social problems.” “Politics of Jesus.” Mennonite theology of service has been part of a tapestry that we risk shredding when we name it as something discrete.

In the early 1980s, in revolutionary Nicaragua, amid a region of social injustice and surging reaction, naming it was part of my assignment. My wife Joetta and I were MCC country representatives. The Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches of Nicaragua wanted to pre-empt charges that they were shirkers – or in this case, counter-revolutionaries – and do more to help their communities develop in ways that benefited the poor. They worked from an understandable mixture of compassion and self-interest not unlike that of other Mennonites in other times of war and social upheaval. Not of one mind about revolution itself, church leaders mostly agreed nonetheless that the failure of Christian churches to work courageously for social justice might have made a Marxist, Sandinista form of social change historically necessary. Part of the problem (said enough local church leaders to get MCC’s attention) was that Mennonite missionaries had postponed talking much about Anabaptism or peacemaking until it was almost too late. But better late than never. My long-term assignment was to devise some kind of regional MCC “peace portfolio.” But first Joetta and I knew we needed to develop workshops and materials on Mennonite theology of service.

Unfortunately, service itself kept getting in the way.

Like the prophet Jonas, whom God ordered to go to Nineveh, I found myself with an almost uncontrollable desire to go in the opposite direction. God pointed one way and all my “ideals” pointed the other. It was when Jonas was traveling as fast as he could away from Nineveh, toward Tarsus, that he was thrown overboard, and swallowed by a whale who took him where God wanted him to go. . . . Like Jonas himself I find myself traveling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox.

-Thomas Merton⁷

Through his writings, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton would mentor me in coming years in many ways. In the press of administrative demands, unexpected visitors – and the sheer burden of ordinary life in the strange shell of a city that was earthquake-ravaged Managua even before the years of insurrection and counterrevolution – I often longed for solitude as Merton had done. Merton’s

journals offered a voyeuristic yet salutary delight, as I read him struggling in the belly of a paradox just enough like my own to reassure me.

Merton's problem was that writing about his contemplative, monastic life seemed to have jeopardized that life. The unexpected success of his autobiographical *Seven Storey Mountain* had helped attract new postulants to his silent Cisterian monastery in Kentucky, filling it with the bustle of new construction and communal tensions. "If I have broken this silence," Merton once remarked, "and if I have been to blame for talking so much about this emptiness that it came to be filled with people, who am I to praise the silence any more? Who am I to publicize this emptiness? Who am I to remark on the presence of so many visitors. . . ?"⁸ He kept wanting to flee to some other monastery or even become a hermit, but his vows of stability and obedience required him to seek the permission of his abbot. His abbot, however, required him to keep writing. Only slowly did Merton come to see where this whale of an impasse had taken him, for writing allowed him more solitude than most of his brothers, and eventually he learned he could pray while writing. That resolution sounds too happy in the short re-telling, however, for midway he had to confess, "My life is a great mess and tangle of half-conscious subterfuges to evade grace and duty. I have done all things badly. I have thrown away great opportunities. . . . If I were more absorbed in the Presence of God, I would be a better writer and would write much less."⁹

The analogy between Merton's problem and mine will not hold if pressed too far. But I still wonder about the opportunities I missed because I resented the demands they might make upon my time. I wonder about the grace I evaded by preferring texts while treating time spent out among churches, pastors, and development promoters in that oral culture as more duty than grace. Even today, I still cannot disentangle myself from a dilemma, whose explaining might involve yet another "half-conscious subterfuge" or might yet offer a real service to others.

The dilemma was one that many church workers will recognize as the recurring tension between the urgent and the important. The urgent was obvious in the headlines of *La Barricada* after we had assumed our duties as MCC country representatives in 1983. No longer simply a cross-border nuisance, the U.S.-backed contras were now striking in the heart of the country. MCC administrators had originally chosen to locate us and our peace portfolio in

Nicaragua because it had had its revolution and seemed relatively free from the kind of repression that constrained our colleagues in Guatemala and El Salvador. Now, however, a low-intensity war was heating up, laying siege, and inflicting many things far worse than our own urgent, unexpected, unwelcome new tasks. But it did inflict those too. Even as the Nicaraguan economy began to grind down, making every bus ride for every administrative errand more tiresome, we could hardly claim to be serving “in the name of Christ” if we ignored the needs of a growing population of displaced persons. What time we had for writing went increasingly to articles against U.S. policy toward Central America. What time we had for developing a peace portfolio went increasingly to consultancy with Nicaraguan evangelical leaders negotiating on behalf of conscientious objectors.¹⁰

Certainly these urgent demands offered opportunities to network and teachable moments for reflecting on our theology of peace and service together with fellow believers in Nicaragua and the Central American region. But even as urgent tasks tended to preclude attention to important ones they also called attention to their very importance. Central American evangelical leaders, and activists in fledgling networks of nonviolence such as *Servicio Paz y Justicia*, regularly lamented that Mennonites had not begun sharing and applying their peace theology in previous decades. Central American Mennonite leaders regularly wished they had biblical and theological resources already in hand, in Spanish, at appropriate education levels, to meet this need even among their own people, now that it was obvious. Somehow I conceived of writing not just workshop materials on service but that first “single monograph” on Mennonite theology of service, which we wished we had available now, ¡ya! The important was no less important because it was being recognized a decade or so too late. Still, to write theological materials on service and peaceable social action – was that important enough to justify writing rather than serving, in solitude rather than in action?

Eventually our assignment did evolve in such a way that I could dedicate myself full time to the peace portfolio in Honduras. Meanwhile SEMILLA, an Anabaptist seminary in Guatemala that holds classes throughout the region, was beginning to gather new resources and offer new possibilities that complemented what MCC could do. But within a year of moving to Honduras, Joetta and I were facing the fact that we were burned out. Or should I say,

being regurgitated, soon to be spewed from the belly of the paradox back onto the shores of North America? Not a particularly pleasant image, but perhaps a consoling one. If only I knew where Nineveh was, much less say I've now preached there to some effect. Maybe I had actually fled Nineveh for Tarsus. For when I finally had opportunity to write more extensively on theology of service, I hesitated over another layer of the paradox.

Was it only for dramatic affect that Jesus went out of his way to show, not only what the Samaritan did, but also what he did not do? The story arose, after all, because "a lawyer, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" Jesus recognized that when service to fellow humanity becomes a point for debate, the debaters may have already missed the point. And so he not only presented the outcast Samaritan as a jarring example of right human relations, he also confronted our patterns of self-justification. He showed us how properly "holy" people may be the most adept at avoiding responsibility for human suffering.

-Unpublished notes for a "theology of service," 1985

Could something be going very wrong when we have to write about service? The urgency I felt to write was not just for Central Americans. It also grew from anxiety about the North American Mennonite church.

Even now I can barely imagine serving in revolutionary Nicaragua without the support of a peoplehood. Obviously financial support was necessary, but more intangible forms of support were absolutely crucial. To have a family that is proud, not disappointed, when one pursues vocational goals that are not particularly lucrative; a family that does not panic at every rumor of war; to grow up in churches where enough stories of conscientious objectors and overseas workers circulate to make service seem a normal thing to do; to accumulate the wisdom of past MCC workers who have tested the ambiguities of service in places like Vietnam – these are great gifts. Called upon to speak for nonviolence amid a revolution and in conversation with liberation theologies, I would have lost hope under the pressures of injustice if I did not know that

my people had been confronting hard questions for generations. We could work from a calm and respectful assurance that our church, however imperfectly, had not only stood for alternatives to exploitation and warfare, but had constituted an alternate history that gave us an identity other than simply “U.S. citizen.”

Simultaneously, however, we accumulated troubling warnings that we dare not idealize our tradition. An embarrassingly large number of Mennonites had voted for Ronald Reagan and seemed convinced by his gross distortions of the Sandinistas’ record. Debates with fundamentalist Mennonite missionaries in the region over whether and how Christians ought to participate in struggles for social justice seemed to go over the same ground again and again. Trips back to the States to speak on Central America might reassure us of how many people were providing sanctuary and opposing U.S. policy on one day, but remind us of our church’s affluence and acculturation the next day. Whatever the balance, this mix itself suggested fragmentation – just when we sensed a greater need for a collective peoplehood witness than ever. While struggling to write about “service,” the limitations of that concept were becoming increasingly clear, at least if service was taken to mean individual acts of “charity” and volunteerism.

Even when we had been seeking only a response from one or two individuals, we had really been seeking the faithful *communities* that had nurtured them in a servanthood tradition. This was my conclusion after participating in a few MCC personnel searches and observing many more. We often needed a certain kind of person with a mix of specialized skills and general adaptability. That much could be said of many organizations, but the right people also needed to possess a modest lifestyle, social awareness, and – to sustain their commitment and struggles – an authentic Christian piety. In my unscientific reading, these seemed to be the kind of people whom MCC could send into difficult situations and trust to find their way, the kind of people who could push forward creative new projects while respecting local communities and working patiently with local churches. We met lots of *internacionalistas* visiting or working in “solidarity” with the Nicaraguan people. But beyond MCC circles it was among people who worked for social justice out of deep roots in their respective Christian traditions that we most consistently found similar combinations of commitment and openness,

apparently because they were responding from something more than ideology or the impact of headlines.

So while some MCC workers return to North America with an urgent and prophetic sense of calling to work for social change back here, I returned with a more pastoral sense of the need to sustain communal traditions that could work and witness over the long haul. My nagging, growing, sense was that we dare not take for granted the traditions that have nurtured us. Even activists who chafe at the slow pace of change in their apparently unresponsive traditions are often drawing on the resources of those traditions; their activism thus proves parasitic if they do not help replenish its sources.

Even at this point my first instinct was to warn, to write, and to propose a vision that would be so elegant yet explanatory that any reader would instantly say, Yes! So we must live and be and do. I had come to see God working in the world pre-eminently through “Abrahamic communities” – creative minorities who receive God’s blessing as an invitation not to self-satisfaction but to bless other peoples by taking the risky lead in living out the social transformations God desires for every larger whole.¹¹ This vision was my synthesis of what I had learned from people like Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, veteran Mennonite missionary David Shank, and Archbishop Helder Camara of Brazil. It held promise for providing an integrated response to problems bedeviling Mennonite social ethics. It articulated the best of what Central American congregations were doing in their own neighborhoods and villages. Above all, it made clear that our calling is not just to *do* service activities but to *be* a people of service. I still stand behind it. But it has carried me “toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox.”

For the warning and the theory have raised this question: What does motivate, form, and sustain an Abrahamic community or peoplehood? Telling people they should form one, join one, or be one is insufficient. If we have been such a community without calling ourselves one, but now insist that the point of our communal identity is to be one, have we already missed the point? Could writing out the vision be a rearguard action within a disintegrating tradition? Such questions nagged when I finally had time and support for writing. If I or my church now needs an explicit theology of service in order to serve, is that a sign of deep and humanly irreversible unfaithfulness?

The truth that Augustine made in the Confessions had eluded him for years. It appears before us as a trophy torn from the grip of the unsayable after a prolonged struggle on the frontier between speech and silence. What was at stake was more than words. The ‘truth’ of which Augustine spoke was not merely a quality of a verbal formula, but veracity itself, a quality of a living human person. Augustine ‘made the truth’ – in this sense, became himself truthful – when he found a pattern of words to say the true thing well. But both the ‘truth’ that Augustine made and the ‘light’ to which it led were for him scripturally guaranteed epithets of Christ, the pre-existent second person of the trinity.

-James J. O’Donnell¹²

Apparently others too were struggling to find new approaches. As Joetta and I returned to live in the U.S., MCC commissioned me to write a book on Christian responses to poverty – the book that became *And Who is My Neighbor?*¹³ The idea was that too much of what MCC was doing to educate its constituency concerning global justice issues had ended up as preaching to the converted. Beyond their circles, others were hearing MCC’s concerns as “guilt trips.” Even when people *are* guilty, guilt *alone* is a poor motivator. MCC workers and their guests often testified that what really had changed them was their personal encounter with the poor. So MCC Information Services had begun collecting stories from the poor themselves. The challenge was to combine these stories with Bible studies in order to replicate in ordinary Sunday school rooms a personal encounter with the poor. Although the assignment recognized the limitations of writing, it inevitably took recourse in writing once again.

If writing service is tricky, then editing the voice of the poor may be trickier still. One of the crucial gifts I have received in life was my editor for this project – John Rogers, a gently incisive African-American who was working for Herald Press at the time. *Quit writing detached biblical and social analysis*, he insisted. *You’re still writing from a position of power*, he implied. *Tell the story of your own poverty; help people connect with their own*. If anyone else had told me this, I would have dismissed it as an attempt to spiritualize poverty. The book that resulted sought to expose the structural isolation,

fearfulness, and impoverishment of our lives when we live in affluent separation from the poor. It invited middle-class Christians to take risks that might bring them the true wealth of human relationships that the poor often experience more deeply than the affluent. Under John's guidance, the project also drew me back toward our common human need for God's grace.

"We love because God first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Why had this truth been so hard to recognize? Service, response to the poor, commitment to struggle for justice, love of neighbor extended even to enemies – call it what you will, it is not finally a "should" so much as a "therefore," a response to God's prior work in our lives. It is a response to God's grace. The pattern can be traced through the whole biblical story. The family of Abraham and Sarah became a blessing to the peoples as it trusted in God's blessing (Gen. 12:1-3). The commandments of the Torah found their premise in "the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex. 20:2). Faithful Hebrews were to host strangers, free their slaves, and bring gifts for the poor to the altar, remembering how God had first treated them when they were strangers, slaves, and afflicted (Ex. 22:21-22; Deut. 15:15; Deut. 26:5-13). Likewise, Jesus' first disciples could learn to forgive one another only when they remembered the exorbitantly greater mercy God had shown them (Matt. 18:23-35). Similarly, Jesus' call to bear the cross became intelligible as an act of hope, not capitulation, because the disciples had already experienced his healing touch, his deliverance and, most of all, the life-giving magnetism of his very person. We have been freed and empowered to love our enemies and perform our neighbors because, as Paul put it in Romans 5, God acted first to reconcile us while we were not only weak but outright enemies of God.

There was one thing that had made it hard to trace Christian service back to its source in God's grace. Even after charting this pattern in two different books, it bothered me that I was starting to sound like Martin Luther. Luther's argument was that authentic love of neighbor must always be a grateful response to God's prior work, and will in fact flow spontaneously from any true believer.¹⁴ I had heard too many evangelicals who claimed that service and social change would flow spontaneously from personal trust and gratitude for God's love, yet they had not convinced me with their lives. To make a long and unfinished story short, if "faith seeks understanding" then the conviction I am now trying to understand is this: We *should* be able to affirm

what is right and biblical about Luther in a way that draws (with Catholicism) upon a more communal, embodied, and sacramental notion of grace, and that does more to train us (with Anabaptism) to follow Christ in life as disciples. Almost everything I have written and begun to work on since I finished writing self-consciously on “theology of service” has in some way related to this project. Even my doctoral dissertation on self-love and self-denial in the thought of St. Augustine responded to background questions about what makes lives of service sustainable, and has prompted emerging questions about how best to express the relationship between grace and discipleship. But perhaps those questions still fail to state the task of sustaining a servant peoplehood communally enough.

During my initial work on theology of service, MCC Executive Secretary John Lapp gave me a slender book by Metropolitan Paulos Mar Gregorios of the Orthodox Church in India entitled *The Meaning and Nature of Diakonia*. Gregorios chides Protestants and their “basic prophetic-preaching emphasis” for failing to root their message in “a community deeply rooted in the mystery of the tabernacle, the presence of the Christian community not only as the people of God, but also as participating in Christ as High Priest of the world, . . . a priestly kingdom.”¹⁵ I probably was not ready for this message, however, for I still wanted words to do too much of the work of service, and service to always be the kind that demonstrably does work. Only now do I begin to understand Gregorios’s insistence that “the prophetic and the cultic are not opposed to each other. The cultic is the true matrix of the prophetic.”¹⁶

These rites, baptism and eucharist, are not just “religious things” that Christian people do. They are the essential rituals of our politics. Through them we learn who we are. Instead of being motives or causes for effective social work on the part of the Christian people, these liturgies are our effective social work. For if the church is rather than has a social ethic, these actions are our most important social witness. It is in baptism and eucharist that we see most clearly the marks of God’s kingdom in the world. They set our standard, as we try to bring every aspect of our lives under their sway.

-Stanley Hauerwas¹⁷

The journey I have travelled in the belly of the paradox that is the dubious service of writing about service, has marked a return. Writing theology of service (like any systematic writing of theology) *may* provide a real service – but only as it participates in an interwoven ecology, an interdependent web, of serving and being served in the people of God. Of course, such a people would not be a people at all if God in Christ had not first come to us incarnate as a human servant, obedient even to death on a cross (Phil. 2). No one idea will sustain such a people; no elegant teaching or prophetic harangue will motivate faithful service; no single correction in ancient Christian theology will set God’s people right. In the ecology of Christian peoplehood, we need all that weaves us together – all of the liturgy, all the stories, all the mentors, all the acts of forgiveness and mutual aid, all the prayer, all the patience with annoying brothers and sisters, all the sacraments, and (finally, yes, in the context of Christ embodied) all the teaching that names and writes the pattern of God’s grace, evoking our grateful response. For it is the triune God who creates, reconciles, and sustains this people, even when part of the web is still being woven or has perhaps been cut. All the rest is re-enactment.

Notes

¹ Wilbert R. Shenk to Gerald Schlabach, 23 December 1983. Shenk is a leading Mennonite missiologist who has served as overseas secretary for the Mennonite Board of Missions and taught at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. He is now Professor of Mission History and Contemporary Culture, School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary.

² Goshen College in Indiana has been a leading intellectual center for North American Mennonites, especially in the Mennonite Church denomination. By gathering scholars around him, and by founding the Mennonite Historical Society and the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Dean Harold S. Bender made the college a center for Anabaptist studies during 1930s through the 1950s. Also active at Goshen during this time was Guy F. Hershberger, a guiding thinker and coalition-builder as Mennonites worked out responses to the labor movement, military conscription, the US civil rights movement and urbanization. For many decades, the college’s motto has been “Culture for Service.” Since the late sixties that emphasis on service has expressed itself in the college’s Study-Service Term, by which most students fulfill a general-education requirement in international studies by spending three months overseas.

³ Harold S. Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision,” *Church History* 13 (March 1944):3-24; *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18 (April 1944):67-88.

⁴ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed., reprint, 1972 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994).

⁵ I owe the beginning of these reflections to a remark by Stanley Hauerwas that “the Church’s word for *universal* is not really *universal* but *catholic*.” I would argue that even the affirmations of the ecumenical councils of the Church can, in their historical particularity, only be understood as authoritative insofar as they were the product of this sort of mutual recognition across particular local Christian communions.

⁶ Gerald W. Schlabach, *To Bless All Peoples: Serving with Abraham and Jesus*. Peace and Justice Series, no. 12 (Scottsdale, PA.: Herald Press, 1991).

⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), 10-11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 357.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 193, 239.

¹⁰ See Gerald W. Schlabach, “Revolutionary Nicaragua: Military Service, Conscientious Objection and Nation-Building,” in *The Role of the Church in Society: An International Perspective*, ed. Urbane Peachey (Carol Stream, IL: International Mennonite Peace Committee, Mennonite World Conference, 1988), 51-70.

¹¹ Also see Gerald W. Schlabach, “The Blessing of Abraham’s Children: A Theology of People,” *Mission Focus* 19.4 (December 1991): 52-55; “Beyond Two-Versus One-Kingdom Theology: Abrahamic Community as a Mennonite Paradigm for Engagement in Society,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 11.3 (Fall 1993):187-210.

¹² James J. O’Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, Latin text with English commentary (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), xvii.

¹³ Gerald W. Schlabach, *And Who is My Neighbor?: Poverty, Privilege and the Gospel of Christ* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990).

¹⁴ Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” 1520, trans. W. A. Lambert, rev. Harold J. Grimm, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm; Helmut T. Lehmann, gen. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 327-77.

¹⁵ Paulos Gregorios, *The Meaning and Nature of Diakonia*. Risk Book Series (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1988), 30-31.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 108.