**Bridges**

Psalm 133; Proverbs 3:5-6

Christina Reimer, July 6, 2025

Our summer theme is “Bridge Over Troubled Water: Signs of Hope and Resilience.” Some of you might recognize this as one of Simon and Garfunkel’s most famous songs from their 1970 album of the same name. It was written by Paul Simon who took his inspiration from “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded,” a version of which can be found as #325 in our Voices Together hymnal. He was also influenced by Claude Jeter’s 1959 gospel song “Oh Mary Don’t You Weep,” particularly Jeter’s line “I’ll be your bridge over deep water if you trust in my name.”

I have always loved bridges and marveled at their structural beauty and strength. Every time I travel to church from the West End, I drive under the stunning bridges of Rosedale Valley Road and the Don Valley Parkway, but I prefer to admire bridges from below rather than driving on them because I am afraid of heights.

From 2013-2015, our family lived in a beautiful part of Quebec called the Eastern Townships. One of our favourite outtings was to go to Parc de la Gorge in Coaticook, a canyon famous for its suspended footbridge – one of the longer footbridges in North America with a length of 554 feet and a height of 160 feet. I would get up the nerve to walk across and just when the end was near and my heart would stop racing, my sons would jump up and down, making the bridge sway beneath our feet. I was not impressed.

What feats of engineering does it take to build a bridge that is strong enough to hold numerous vehicles and bikes and pedestrians while storms rage and winds blow?

I turned to children’s YouTube videos to explain this to me because I am no engineer. What I found out is that it isn’t only the strength of steel that gives a bridge its fortitude. It is a combination of compression and tension. Consider the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. It is a suspension bridge that uses the force of tension. This kind of bridge is made up of a “deck” that spans across the water and then is “hung” or “suspended” by thick cables above that are supported by tall towers and anchored on each end by heavy weights. The force of the weight of vehicles is spread out in this structure. The tension appears when the cables pull down on the towers and anchors on either side, supporting this weight.

I also learned that bridges need to be flexible to some degree to handle changes in traffic and environmental fluctuations like wind and temperature.

I want to talk about two of the theological themes that come up for me when I consider how bridges work. Tension and flexibility.

When we look at the images that Brad has included in our slide presentation, we get the sense that the bridge is static or still and the water underneath is moving. But this isn’t the case. The bridge also moves. It shifts in response to its environment.

I find it interesting that in Simon’s lyrics, he says: “like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down.” He’s talking about a person as a bridge – a person who will extend themself across a divide in times of tension and turmoil in order to create the conditions in which the other person or persons can feel safe to cross. I’d like us to consider how we, as God’s people, can be dynamic, moving bridges across troubled water.

Our passage from Psalm 133 talks about the “blessedness of unity” among the people of God. A bridge across a divide in times of tension and turmoil unites sides. But what is unity and how do we go about bridging divides in order to create unity? One way that the historic church has done this is through the writing of doctrines and confessions of faith, which are meant to connect us on matters of belief and practice. As Mennonites, we are at a place of tension and turmoil when it comes to our Confession of Faith. As a congregation, we have registered an official stance of variance with our regional conference about Article 19 of our confession about marriage being blessed if it upholds the union of one man and one woman.

I would argue that TUMC’s letter of variance is not a rejection of the Confession, but in keeping with the very purpose of the Confession as outlined in the beginning of the document. This is what it says:

1. [The Confession] provides guidelines for the interpretation of scripture. The Confession itself is not scripture and it is subject to the authority of the Bible.

2. It provides guidance for belief and practice from a Mennonite perspective.

3. It helps to build a foundation for unity among Mennonite churches.

4. It provides an outline for sharing information about what Mennonite faith looks like for newcomers to the faith.

5. It provides updated interpretations of Mennonite beliefs and practices in changing times.

6. It provides a framework for discussing Mennonite beliefs and practices within the church and more broadly with other Christian denominations.

The Confession, by its own words, is a living document that reflects how we as a Mennonite community interpret truths for our time in response to how we read the Bible. It is not static and unchangeable, just as we, the confessors of the Confession, are not static and unchangeable. It is like a bridge that, by necessity, shifts in response to its environment.

So, it is important to continue to re-examine together whether or not the Confession functions the way it is intended to function as our understanding of the world and the church and scripture changes during times of troubled water.

One of the purposes of the Confession is to provide unity among Mennonite churches – unity of belief and practice. But what the Confession says more specifically is that it provides a “foundation” for unity, something to build upon.

Does the line “We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman” still function as a solid foundation for church unity? I would say “no.” This line has been a source of growing disunity in the Mennonite church. Theologically, some sibling congregations uphold this line as reflective of their own “conservative” views of marriage while others thoroughly reject it in belief and practice because it excludes the sanctity of queer marriage, queer families and queer gender identities. This disagreement causes tension in our bridges. But a good bridge is made to adapt to tension with flexibility.

In conflict escalation theory, the first stage of conflict is the spark that activates disagreement, like the Confession’s definition of marriage. At this early stage of conflict, we are still speaking *to* one another about a problem we share. We are dialoguing together, unified, in our common problem and we are trying to figure it out together. We still have unity in our tension.

If we fail to keep talking to each other, and conflict continues to escalate, the pattern goes that we stop talking to each other about our shared problem and start talking *about* each other as the sources and perpetrators of said problem. We are no longer unified in our sharing of a common problem. The other is the problem. And, if we escalate even further, we find that we can no longer locate points of unity and we end up dissolving the relationship and the dialogue ends.

Maybe this is okay. Maybe there are unreconcilable differences. Maybe a break up is inevitable. But isn’t there still an underlying longing for unity in spite of our differences?

A number of us just returned from the Mennonite Church Canada Nationwide conference where we focused on the importance of intercultural connection and the celebration of a diversity of gifts. We heard the voices of people from the Chin culture, the Philippines, Ethiopia, the Hmong, Swiss Mennonites, Russian Mennonites, etc., and, a Pentecost-like highlight, for me, was when the Lord’s supper was blessed in 4 different languages without translation - all unified in their commitment to breaking bread and pouring wine in the name of Christ, our common saviour. Christ was our unifying bridge across all linguistic difference and we collectively spoke the faithful “amen” even when we didn’t comprehend exactly what was being said.

It was a profound moment of unity in the context of difference and limited understanding.

In 1927, the French writer and mystic Romain Rolland wrote a letter to Sigmund Freud in which he talks about something he calls the “oceanic feeling.” He describes this as the sensation of oneness with everything and sees it as the source of religious longing for oneness with God and all of creation. Freud latched onto this insight and 2 years later wrote *Civilization and its Discontents.* Freud links the oceanic feeling to the original feeling a fetus has in utero when it is one with its mother and its environment and has all of its needs met immediately – food, shelter, belonging.

Freud writes that when a baby is born it suffers its first psychological injury because it now has to cry for nourishment and the feeling of being safely connected and having its needs met. This injury, according to Freud, is our first experience of separation and disunity and we long for our womb state and re-unification with the source of being for the rest of our lives.

Belonging, safety, nourishment, connection. Can these be adopted as the foundational values of unity for our church? The flexible cables that put tension on the towers of doctrine and support those who wish to cross? When we see unity as tied to a static and rigid view of right practice and right belief, we stand upon a weakened bridge that cannot hold in times of troubled water.

I’d like to conclude with some words from Paul’s letter to the Galatians. He is encouraging these new Christians, who are a mix of Jews and Gentiles, to work towards unity in spite of their cultural differences. The issue of the day was whether or not Gentiles should be circumcised in accordance with Jewish law. Paul writes that those who believe in Jesus are saved by faith alone, not by submitting to one culture’s customs. Galatians 3:26-28 says:

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

As followers of Christ, let us lay ourselves down as bridges over troubled water, even when we have limited understanding. Let us seek unity in times of tension, providing belonging, safety, nourishment, and connection to all of our siblings in faith. Amen.