

THE GATHERING: WE'VE COME THIS FAR BY GUM

Like so many movements, ours began as a counterpoint, a protest, a remonstrance, a complaint. From recent to long-time-ago graduates of McMaster Divinity College and assorted familiars, we came together because we wanted a place from which to raise a common voice, to bear witness to the injustices and shenanigans of the wrecking crew that had gone from foothold to stranglehold on the college where so many of us had been formed into baptist ministers. From a place of diverse viewpoints, a wideness sufficient to embrace both a Clark and a Paul (and a Ray and a Mel and a John), it had metamorphosed into a thing of uniform perspectives and hermeneutics, tenure replaced by short-term contracts, teaching by dogma, mentoring by control, historical depth by branded commercial crass. The embryonic profile of women in the Convention once more whimpered and died.

So what have we become? What draws us together close to two decades later? What would be the 35-second elevator-ride answer to the question, so what *kind* of baptist are you? What is The Gathering of Baptists? When we go shopping beyond our company for speakers and resources for our bi-annual gathering, it's a sales pitch to which we have to give some thought.

The MacDiv glossy appears to be here to stay. There is nothing left to reclaim, it would seem. Most of us haven't been to Convention in years; some of us have re-matriated our archives. Several years ago, without much of a debate, the Ontario-Quebec peace fellowship folded itself into the Gathering and the theme of peace-making that at least for awhile animated the former was diluted in the latter. We are incorporating, institutionalising, seeking the capacity to credential and ordain. We are reputed to be, notorious for being, welcoming and affirming of our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered, queer, questioning and two-spirited sisters and brothers. The churches we pastor or cling to are mostly not with us, wherever we are. We remain

disproportionately male, straight and ordained. Those issues that elicit the longest and most passionate conversations on our list-serve are about the latest un-gospel, corporatist thing the convention has done. We also remain the best, safest and warmest hearth around for fallen-off-the-wagon baptists like us.

The Gathering's sort-of-sister organisation, the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, which has provided soul-food for so many of us for so long, seems to be headed into protectionist territory; head down, just as US American as ever, distressingly little progress made in the enfleshing of the 'NA' part of the name, its communications as parochial as ever. Disconcertingly or wonderfully, summer conference is coming to Montréal, where the visitors will find themselves discombobulated, de-centred, perhaps delighted, by an over-par Canadian dollar and a piece of Europe so close to home. In the midst of the tribal gathering, some will notice that some are marking the 400th anniversary of the arrival of our own personal Columbus.

A few hardy Gatherers will be there, not always sure why, confident in the expectation of both insult and unparalleled nourishment. We will once more wonder why Canadians can't muster the wherewithal to cut loose and do our own thing, to tell and listen to our own stories, hold up the mirrors of *our* lives, our peculiarly Canadian-shaped images and icons of struggle to live in this northern light. Self-congratulatory in our role of peace-keepers (despite being amongst the lowest contributors at 171, alongside Malawi, Fiji, Guatemala and Mongolia) we imagined that that kind of creativity arises out of the crucible of imperial war-making. Well, here we are, killing and being killed in Afghanistan in a war we don't remember saying yes to. DND now has adverts in bus shelters urging young people – no longer 'to see the world with the Canadian Armed Forces' but – to 'Come and Fight.' Fight. But, being Canadians, we don't get too worked up about it.

So what do we get worked up about? What seizes our attention long enough to form an institution and

nurture a movement? Around what calling will Gatherers gather as we move into our third decade? What do we want to be when we grow up?

What if we were to be a well and a nourishment for the various outposts of the Beloved community of which we are parts?

What if we were a tent or a doorway, always propped open, offering welcome for any wayfarer, baptist or whatever, young, old, gay, straight, poor and not-so?

What if we were to be builders and experimenters and kickers-against-the-braces-baptists, worshipping deeply, expansively and exuberantly?

What if we left behind the battles of language and gender and economics and did it all without walls?

What if we were an intentional and a learning community, provoking one another to consciousness and good works and faithful, risky living? midwifing one another into lives shaped by a relationship with God and worked out through moments of advent, labouring, crucifixion and resurrection?

What if we were a gathering of story-tellers, re-telling the story that gives us breath – with dance and liturgy and music and banners of saffron?

What if we were a praying community, carrying one another through our days lived out in the constant company of the One who still makes our hearts burn within us?

So what would this gathering look like? How do we institutionalise and move? Ground ourselves and keep our wings? Leave behind and hold on; set out on a journey already begun?

CHINA, TIBET AND SUDAN: The Genocide Olympics **Connecting the dots** *IDP Camp in West Darfur*



While Tibet has seized the attention of the world, China watchers already had a long list of questions that

the Olympic organisers needed to consider, chief among them, China's support for the Sudanese genocide, now into its sixth year. China's growing thirst for oil and Sudan's desire for hard currency to buy weapons and the co-operation of European infrastructure giants have combined in a partnership of death and displacement. Security Council resolutions and peacekeeping initiatives are vetoed, undermined and diluted by Sudan's powerful friend. Meanwhile, the world is beating a path to Beijing's door. China rising is too lucrative to ignore, its occupations, its repressions and suppressions insufficient to deter the merchants and profiteers, looking for cheap labour and eager consumers. Tiananmen Square fades to black.

Hu Jia, a human rights activist, was sentenced this week to three and a half years in prison for the crime of 'libelling the Chinese political and social systems' in five online articles and two interviews with foreign journalists. He has advocated for autonomy for Tibet, environmental clean-up, the return of the expropriated land of peasants, AIDS prevention, and the rule of law. His own trial was closed, his conviction based on a dubious 'confession' that he was indeed the author of the articles in question. Though China won the Games with promises that journalists would have free rein during and in the lead-up to the Olympics, the usual conditions, restrictions and spin prevail. NGOs are both making use of the spotlight shone on China – and Tibet, Taiwan and Sudan – and wondering out loud why the award of the Olympics to China was ever contemplated. Politics and sport do not exist in separate spheres; the Games lend an illegitimate credibility to a country driving genocide in Sudan, economic, cultural and political destruction in Tibet and human rights violations within its own borders. Sarkozy is not going; Harper is skipping the opening ceremonies. Stephen Spielberg has bowed out. Coca-Cola, Microsoft, McDonald's, Anheuser-Busch and Volkswagen are getting nervous. Maybe, somehow, the world will wake up to Darfur. Maybe the killing will stop.

Cuba's Post-Fidel Dispensation

Lee A. McKenna

The first time I went to Cuba it was to participate, along with about a dozen other Baptist women, mostly pastors, in a service of ordination of the first Baptist woman on the island. Her name was Clara Rodés, sister of Pastor Francisco (Paco) and wife of Raúl Suarez, Baptist pastor, founder of the *Fraternidad de iglesias*

evangélicas bautistas de Cuba (FIEBAC), director of the Centro Martin Luther King and former Cuban parliamentarian. Clara died not many years later, due to complications related to a kidney ailment and the lack of some simple piece of medical equipment unavailable due to the embargo.

Several years later, I was once more representing the BPFNA at a woman's ordination – this time Gisela Muñoz Perez, the first woman to be so recognised in the Eastern Baptist Convention. Her husband, Elmer Labastida, is pastor of Second Baptist Church, Santiago de Cuba, which is perched on the eastern shores of the island below the heavily forested peaks of the Sierra Maestra. (Elmer spent some years of his youth at Briercrest, sent there by his parents for fear he would be swept up as many of his friends were, in the revolutionary fervour of the late 1950s.)



Santiago is rich in revolutionary history. From the Sierra Maestra on 26 July 1953, Fidel launched his first attempt to overthrow the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. The attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago was disastrous and a majority of the 150 rebels were killed. Fidel was arrested and tried. In the course of the trial, held at the Moncada, Fidel delivered himself in his own defence of the first of many hours-long speeches, this one containing the famous words, *‘La historia me absolverá!’* (‘History will absolve me.’) Though sentenced to 15 years in prison, he was released less than two years later under a general amnesty. In December of 1956, the Castro brothers and their group of 80 comrades, which included Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, returned from exile in Mexico, only to be met by Batista forces, which reduced their number to twenty. They regrouped in the Sierra Maestra above Santiago where they joined forces with young rebels who had been stoking the fires of revolt during Castro's imprisonment and exile.

The leader of the Santiago movement, Frank País,

was a 19 year-old tenor in the choir of Second Baptist Church. He, along with his brother, Josué, had been organising quietly in the years since the failed attack on the Moncada and, with Castro's return to Oriente Province, took on the name of the rebels, *Movimiento 26 de julio*. Amongst the women who spent their evenings sewing uniforms by lamplight for the coming rebellion were other members of Second Baptist. When Frank and Josué were killed by Batista forces in June of 1957, the streets of the city filled with mourners.

In Santiago for Gisela's ordination and the 100th anniversary of the Oriental Baptist Convention, I talked to some of those women, some of whom participated in the ordination service for Gisela. Elmer took me to see the artefacts of the Santiago chapter, the Second Baptist chapter, of the Cuban Revolution, preserved at the old Moncada Barracks, now a museum, its pock-marked walls mute testimony to the opening salvos of 1953.

Each time I have visited Santiago, I take my meals at the home of Isabela and Miguel Duque de Estrada. Late into the evening, we would sit on the darkened front porch and talk, our voices low, wary, the conversation rich. It was there that I got my Cuban education. *‘¿Por qué soñar?’* Why bother dreaming? Miguel, an architect, would say. What's the point of dreaming – about drawing and designing and building beautiful, extraordinary buildings when there is only one building to be built here in Cuba: a worker's cottage? One size, one set of dimensions, the usual materials. Beauty is not permitted.

Socialist! he would sniff. This country hasn't been socialist since 1961! There are four economies here, he would say: the peasant economy, the rationed market, the black market and capitalist market for the rich and the tourist.

Castro, the liberal reformers and urban guerrillas who made up the majority of his movement, favoured a Cuban version of Roosevelt's New Deal. However, it was the Marxist-Stalinists in the ranks of the fledgling government who gained ascendancy (including Raúl, Che and, eventually, the Argentinean economist, Raúl Prebisch) and to whom Castro capitulated. While the early nationalisation of foreign assets, primarily US American, land redistribution and the re-tooling of the mansions, hotels and casinos of the Batista régime into schools, hospitals and libraries had an economic levelling effect, reducing the wealth of the rich – or encouraging their flight from the island – and improving the health, literacy and housing conditions of the poor, the radically isolationist policies of the leadership ensured economic and cultural segregation and stagnation and the repression

of dissent became features of every day life. Through the Bay of Pigs and the Missile Crisis, the mentality of siege deepened and a *rapprochement* begun with JFK died in Dallas; newspaper and broadcast media were seized or shut down; major industries were enfeebled, food rationing began, investment disappeared; dependence on the Soviets became complete.

In a meeting between Cuban and Canadian church leaders in the mid-1990s, including the Inter-church Committee for Human Rights in Latin America, one asked about the repression of rights of assembly, freedom of opinion and expression, the imprisonment and execution of dissidents – and the response came: *Vale*. It's worth it. The economic, social and cultural rights that our people enjoy are worth the repression of civil and political rights.

The highway billboards and street *manchas* with their high school pep rally slogans urge fidelity to the Castro dream. In town squares, elderly alumnae of the Buena Vista Social Club draw appreciative crowds; crates are turned over for rambunctious games of dominoes. The vintage automobiles of the 1950s that used to make you feel as if you have stumbled onto a movie set, are gradually making their way to the scrap heap as the numbers of imported cars, and not just Ladas and Cuban 'camels', begin to crowd the streets of post-'Special-Period' Cuba. Limited easing of restrictions on private enterprise beyond the tourist-only shops is evident in the appearance of tiny, converted front-room restaurants and signs indicating *casa particular* rooms for rent.

Hector Lunes (not his real name), a Presbyterian pastor and a critic of the Castro régime, has found his movements monitored and any possibilities of advancement (from improved housing to an increase in his \$12 per month wage) restricted, denied exit visas, even when he was serving as one of the Presidents of the World Council of Churches. Fidel is somewhere between the two popular polarities, he told me some years ago. Neither devil nor saint – the former view held by the Cuban *exilios*, the latter by progressive North American and European Christians. Neither is helpful; neither expression will prepare us for post-Fidel Cuba. The truth is somewhere in between: there is much here to be applauded, principles of equality that are barely

comprehended beyond the shores of this island; woven into us Cubans, but no longer, not for a long time, manifest in the conduct of our government. And there is the evidence of our daily lives, the fear, the deprivation, the information vacuum in which we live, because of his fear that if we knew the truth, we would all leave. He doesn't know us. But then we don't know ourselves. We lie to ourselves.' *Doblaje*, he called it, not easily translatable; something like double-speak.

So the post-Fidel period has arrived – sort of. While retiring from the leadership of the Communist Party of Cuba, he promised to continue the 'battle of ideas', to offer guidance to those who have taken the reins of power, primarily, his brother, Raúl. Initial reaction was sceptical: nothing will change until he is truly gone. But yet, change is happening. Quite remarkable change. A



mere ten days after Fidel's return to barracks, the country has signed the United Nations International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights – a deed that Fidel had refused since the covenants' entry into force in 1976. In the weeks that followed, Raúl has begun to put into place initiatives to address a critical shortage of housing, jobs and transportation, low wages and scarcity of food. Cubans are now permitted the use of cellphones. As of a week ago, some Cubans – military families, sugar workers, construction workers, teachers and doctors – will be able for the first time since 1959 to get title to their state-owned homes. Two days later Raúl announced changes in the stage wage system that will

permit workers to maximise their earnings.

In the early years, Raúl, as head of the armed forces, was Fidel's enforcer, sending hundreds of Batista loyalists to the firing squad and, later, those of his own ranks who failed to toe his line. The low-profile and laconic pragmatist and organiser to his philosopher, lime-light-loving and verbose brother, Raúl responded to the end of Soviet Union by opening up the island economy to foreign tourism, the US dollar and limited private enterprise. The convulsion expected with Fidel's leave-taking, by whatever means, has not happened. He has lasted long enough to see other Latin American governments move closer to his world view, mitigating substantially the isolation of earlier decades.

The end of this year Fidel may still be around to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of his revolution.

Whoever finds themselves in the White House by then will more likely than not use the opportunity to bring to an end 50 years of perpetual and futile antagonism to a country whose conduct cannot compare to that of China or Saudi Arabia or that of dozens of US client states over the course of Cold War antagonisms. The challenge may come in post-Raúl Cuba as the memories of revolution fade and new generations more attuned to the world beyond their shores and its consumptive appeals arise.

FALL GATHERING

Retreat from Redemptive Violence

The question for that week's Cross-Country Check-up was 'What is the relationship between religion and conflict? Is religion a help or a hindrance in situations of conflict?' An early caller is both articulate and unequivocal:

Most religions are built around a mythological structure of blood sacrifice. Religion feeds violence; it hinders all attempts to transform or resolve the conflict. The role of religion is occasionally and ritually to lance the violence by giving it ritual expression, letting some of it out. Sometimes to settle the violence of the group onto a single victim. But from inside its fundamental ethos of structural violence, it is absurd to see religion as anything but a hindrance in situations of conflict. That's why people are less and less religious these days.

How did this come to be? How did this opinion expressed on a phone-in programme in Canada in 2002 come to be the commonly-held assumption of centuries' duration? How did the one who preached enemy-love, the one known as the Prince of Peace come to be regarded as the Head and Author of a cult steeped in violence? What went wrong? Most pointedly, how has our 'default position' on soteriology, that of substitutionary atonement, contributed to, made possible, this apparently contradictory validation of sacred violence?

Why should it be so obvious that a violent death should 'work' as a form of ultimate resolution? How did satisfaction notions of atonement based on violent exchange come to be regarded as the natural meaning of the biblical text? In fact, if we could step outside of the deeply ingrained strictures of centuries of doctrinal moulding, we might even ask, 'Can one imagine a more obsessional phantasm than that of a God who demands the torturing of His own Son to death as satisfaction for his anger?'

Fall Gathering: 24, 25 October 2008: *Tony Bartlett, a scholar and teacher on non-violent doctrines of atonement, will pursue a topic of conversation that is literally at the 'crux' of our faith, lay or clergy. Why did Good Friday happen? what do we believe happened? what was 'accomplished'? who said? We will discover to what extent our default position on atonement is all about redemptive violence, a violence that works. Stay tuned.*

LITANY: 'At the Cross'

Ray Hobbs

One: At the Cross

All: We encounter the Violence embedded in the very nature of humanity; the willingness to rid the world of dissidence and challenge by an act of absolute brutality. We see Cain's action repeated, hear his voice denying responsibility – and we weep for something better.

One: At the Cross ...

All: We see Power at its most exposed. Rome's peace was the stifling of freedom; the oppression of the Other; the unashamed use of force to fulfill its will – and we weep for something better.

One: At the Cross ...

All: We experience the Emptiness of human endeavour as it seeks to control, to dominate and to re-do Creation in its own image.

One: At the Cross ...

All: Creation found its voice in protest as witness to these barbarities. Darkness fell over the earth. The turning back of Creation when the 'greater light to rule the day' gave up its throne and withdrew its face in shame.

One: At the Cross ...

All: An innocent man suffered and died. Some found this expedient; others found it small tragedy, justified by the greater good. But there were others who saw it as the theft of justice and righteousness.

One: At the Cross ...

All: We witness the Grace of the dying one as he seeks forgiveness and absolution for his mockers and killers. In deed, what language can we borrow to give word to this profound act? In wonder we offer thanks and praise.

One: *At the Cross ...*

All: We find a new way of living in the face of despair. We see light in the darkness. We discover, in the love expressed for the world which can sink so low, reason to hope, and to live. We await the third day.

PSALM: People Power at the Die-in

Denise Levertov

Over our scattered tents by night
lightning and thunder called to us.

Fierce rain blessed us,
catholic, all-encompassing.
We walked through blazing morning
into the city of law,
of corrupt order, of invested power.

By day and by night
we sat in the dust,

on the cement pavement we sat down and sang.

In the noon of a long day, sharing the work of that play,
we died together, enacting
the death by which all
shall perish unless we act

Solitariness drew close, releasing
each solitude into its blossoming.

We gave to each other the roses
of our communion –

A culture of gardens, horticulture not agribusiness,
arbours among the lettuce, small terrains.

When we tasted the small, ephemeral
harvest of our striving,
great power flowed from us,
luminous, a promise. Yes! ...

great energy flowed from solitude,
a great power from communion.



BPFNA's 2008 Conference

July 14-19, 2008 -- Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue, Quebec

This year's BPFNA Summer Conference will take place on the grounds of John Abbott College, Ste Anne de Bellevue. On Monday night, we will hear stories of faith in captivity from Jim Loney, one of four CPTers (Christian Peacemaker Teams) kidnapped and held in Iraq two years ago. In a recent e-mail, Jim shared this litany, one that he composed and repeated daily during his four-month-long ordeal, only recently 'polishing it', he says, and committing it to paper.

One: O most holy sacred heart

All: Have mercy on me

One: Have mercy on me

All: Give ear to my plea

One: O most holy open heart

All: Have mercy on me

One: O most holy healing heart

All: Have mercy on me

One: O most holy loving heart

All: Have mercy on me

One: O most holy living heart

All: Have mercy on me

One: O most holy giving heart

All: Have mercy on me

One: O most holy forgiving heart

All: Have mercy on me

One: O most holy beating heart

All: Have mercy on me

One: O most holy burning heart

All: Have mercy on me

One: O most holy compassionate heart

All: Have mercy on me

One: O most holy courageous heart

All: Have mercy on me

One: O most holy suffering heart

All: Have mercy on me

One: O most holy faithful heart

All: Have mercy on me

One: O most holy listening heart

All: Have mercy on me

One: O most holy searching heart
All: Have mercy on me
One: O most holy pilgrim heart
All: Have mercy on me
One: O most holy waking heart
All: Have mercy on me
One: O most holy waiting heart
All: Have mercy on me
One: O most holy joyful heart
All: Have mercy on me
One: O most holy steadfast heart
All: Have mercy on me
One: O most holy saving heart
All: Have mercy on me
One: Have mercy on me
All: Give ear to my plea
One: Give ear to my plea
All: Deliver me
One: From every bondage
All: Deliver me
One: From every chain
All: Deliver me
One: From every captivity
All: Deliver me
One: From every shackle
All: Deliver me
One: From every prison
All: Deliver me
One: From every handcuff
All: Deliver me
One: From every slavery
All: Deliver me
One: From every tomb
All: Deliver me
One: From every darkness
All: Deliver me
One: From every shadow
All: Deliver me
One: From every shame
All: Deliver me
One: From every oppression
All: Deliver me
One: From every hatred
All: Deliver me
One: From every greed
All: Deliver me
One: From every hunger
All: Deliver me
One: From every anguish
All: Deliver me

One: From every affliction
All: Deliver me
One: From every domination
All: Deliver me
One: From every servitude
All: Deliver me
One: From every fear
All: Deliver me
One: From every violence
All: Deliver me
One: Deliver me
All: Have mercy on me
One: Have mercy on me
All: I will live free.
One: In the power of the cross
All: I will live free
One: In the power of peace
All: I will live free
One: In the power of love
All: I will live free
One: In the power of forgiveness
All: I will live free
One: In the power of nonviolence
All: I will live free
One: In the power of healing
All: I will live free
One: In the power of compassion
All: I will live free
One: In the power of justice
All: I will live free
One: In the power of solidarity
All: I will live free
One: In the power of hope
All: I will live free
One: In the power of surrender
All: I will live free
One: In the power of trust
All: I will live free
One: In the power of simplicity
All: I will live free
One: In the power of community
All: I will live free
One: In the power of joy
All: I will live free
One: In the power of truth
All: I will live free
One: In the power of obedience
All: I will live free
One: In the power of disobedience
All: I will live free

One: In the power of sacrifice
 All: I will live free
 One: In the power of giving
 All: I will live free
 One: In the power of resurrection
 All: I will live free
 One: I will live free
 All: Have mercy on me
 One: Have mercy on me
 All: Bring me to be
 One: To the reign of God
 All: Bring me to be
 One: To the City of God
 All: Bring me to be
 One: To the table of God
 All: Bring me to be
 One: To the glory of God
 All: Bring me to be
 One: To the Jerusalem of justice
 All: Bring me to be
 One: To the Jerusalem of love
 All: Bring me to be
 One: To the Jerusalem of sharing
 All: Bring me to be
 One: To the Jerusalem of peace
 All: Bring me to be
 One: To the Jerusalem of freedom
 All: Bring me to be
 One: Into freedom from fear
 All: Bring me to be
 One: Into freedom from violence
 All: Bring me to be
 One: Into freedom from hatred
 All: Bring me to be
 One: Into freedom from oppression
 All: Bring me to be
 One: Into freedom from greed
 All: Bring me to be
 One: Into freedom from despair
 All: Bring me to be
 One: Into freedom from domination
 All: Bring me to be
 One: Into freedom from subjugation
 All: Bring me to be
 One: Into freedom from privilege
 All: Bring me to be
 One: Into freedom from judgement
 All: Bring me to be
 One: Into your light
 All: Bring me to be

One: Bring me to be
 All: Have mercy on me
 One: Have mercy on me
 All: Help me to see
 One: O most holy sacred heart
 All: Give ear to my plea
 One: Suffering Servant
 All: Deliver me
 One: Prince of Peace
 All: Set me free
 One: Lamb of God
 All: Bring me to be
 One: Light of the world
 All: Help me to see

In the Next Issue of The Gathering Newsletter:

Book Reviews:

John Shelby Spong's *Jesus for the Non-Religious:*

Any volunteers to write a short piece, please let the editor know.

Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism:*

Naomi Klein explores the intersection of super profits and mega-disaster, using the biblical Great Flood as prototype, and begins with Katrina: 'We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did.' Jim Douglass' *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why he died and why it matters* (to be released 1 May) will surprise the reader with the weaving of Douglass' (and JFK's) catholic spirituality and the writings of Merton in a search for truth.

And more: Contributions of all sorts welcome

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