

Mennonites and the long shadow of ethnic identity

Denominations often struggle to separate faith from ethnicity. Hyung Jin Kim Sun has experienced this firsthand.

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#) in the [November 2025](#) issue
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In Review



Building Mennonite Belonging

Toward an Intercultural Church

By Hyung Jin (Pablo) Kim Sun
McGill-Queen's University Press

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Attending public school in Washington, DC, in the 1980s and '90s, I was taught to embrace my ethnicity—Pennsylvania German with ancestors who emigrated from what is now Switzerland—among other ethnicities. From an early age, I also learned to distinguish between a faith tradition shared by people around the world and an ethnicity shared with people who may not be part of that faith tradition. (For example, in the ecumenical Christian community my Mennonite family belonged to, I knew that one multigenerational family was Lutheran religiously and Norwegian ethnically.) After reading Hyung Jin Kim Sun's book, however, I see that religion and ethnicity can't be fully separated in church settings.

Kim Sun has experienced this challenge firsthand. The child of Korean immigrants, he grew up in Paraguay, where there are colonies of Mennonites who left Canada a century ago because of changes to the laws that restricted their ability to educate their children in German-speaking private schools. Although he heard about and visited the Mennonite colonies, Kim Sun did not think of them as religious. It was only during seminary in the United States that he came to know Mennonites as a Christian tradition and joined a Mennonite church. In recent years, Kim Sun has been working ecumenically in Canada while seeking to understand power dynamics, dominant ideologies, cultural imperialism, and settler colonialism. He draws on this expertise to argue that Christians need to strive specifically to be anti-racist, to decolonize, and to bring to the center the voices and experiences of those who have historically been relegated to the margins.

As a Mennonite who worked for three years for a newspaper covering the Anabaptist world, I've seen many examples of what Kim Sun describes in his book. While 70 percent of Mennonites globally are African, Asian, and Latin American, the dominant Mennonite ethnic identities remain Swiss, German, Dutch, and Russian. I found that Mennonites accepted me easily because I have two common Swiss-German last names. People of other ethnicities "experience barriers to being fully integrated into church life," Kim Sun writes. "They also name whiteness as another barrier that excludes them," because of its association with the dominant ethnicities.

Kim Sun's vision extends beyond mere multiculturalism, toward what some scholars see as "the most advanced form of pluralism that currently exists." In such an environment, "genuine intercultural relationships and community seek to respect differences while trying neither to collapse nor exclude the other." Striving to become an intercultural church is especially important for any "Christian denominations with dominant ethnic groups," Kim Sun writes, naming Anglican, Dutch Reformed, Lutheran, and Presbyterian churches.

Kim Sun offers concrete suggestions for Mennonite churches seeking to move toward interculturalism. While Anabaptists traditionally value adult baptism and joining the church with all of its responsibilities, Kim Sun advocates a radical hospitality which sees beyond current members and welcomes the gifts that may be brought by those who are not yet ready to make a full commitment. There comes a point, however, when people need to become part of the body rather than being treated as "perpetual guests," notes Kim Sun. An intercultural ethic of mutual hospitality envisions each culture as hosts, sharing "their sounds, smells, and dances."

Readers of other denominations may want to consider the theologies that shape peoplehood in their traditions as they learn about the three Mennonite theologies that Kim Sun identifies: messianic community, missional church, and shalom church. The shalom church model is especially important in Kim Sun's vision for intercultural church life:

Becoming an intercultural church community requires the cultivation of shalom, a place where people from diverse socio-cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds can learn from one another, help one another, and celebrate with one another because of their differences and not in spite of them. To foster and enhance this mutual shalom, it is necessary to identify types of exclusionary practices and systems operative in the

community and to change existing power structures.

He connects the Hebrew concept of shalom to the Spanish word *convivencia*, meaning “living together-ness.” Both envision well-being, justice, and right relationships for all in a society, challenging the typical Mennonite tendency to focus on peacemaking and conscientious objection to war at a personal level.

This book puts the *multi* in *multidisciplinary*: one of its most beautiful insights comes through biblical exegesis. In a discussion of Revelation 21:26, about “the glory and the honor of the nations,” Kim Sun observes that the Greek word rendered “nations” comes from *ethnos*. No lexicon is necessary to see his point that a fuller translation would be “the glory and honor of the ethnicities.” Further, the phrase is in the genitive case, indicating possession. Each ethnicity bears its own glory and honor. “They enter the city not as culture-less entities, but as fully cultural beings,” Kim Sun writes, “enhancing the city’s diversity and glorifying God.”

Mennonites and other Anabaptists teach that the Bible and Jesus are “above all other theological sources.” Yet since there is no culture-less reading of scripture, it’s not enough to say that all of our cultures share the same Christ and the same scripture. Such a statement masks ways that colonialism and racism have affected us and led to domination and exploitation. As Kim Sun puts it, “Mennonites might celebrate that they seriously listen to everyone at the table while being unaware of who has been filtered out or who did not come because they felt unsafe at the table.”