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WHAT SHALL WE BE:  
INHERITED CONTROVERSIES AND CONFLICTS IN THE MENNONITE CHURCH USA

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WHAT SHALL WE BE:  
INHERITED CONTROVERSIES AND CONFLICTS IN THE MENNONITE CHURCH USA

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE  
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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## DEDICATION

Thank you, Dr. Keppel, for your patience, wise guidance, and, above all else, your encouragement.

## ABSTRACT

Dramatic social changes in the early twenty-first century United States led to dramatic shifts and schism in a variety of religious groups. The Mennonite Church USA, a denomination created from the merger of two older bodies, the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church, has wrestled with these same social justice issues, most notably sexuality and gender, from its inception in 2002. This work situates that struggle within the larger religious landscape of the United States. In doing so it traces the history of both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church, examining the ways in which social conflicts in the twentieth century, such as the civil rights movement and the war in Vietnam, were dealt with by these two groups. In exploring that history, three distinct groups appear in both denominations, two of which were heavily informed by fundamentalism. These differences, which grew over the course of the twentieth century, coupled with distinct differences in polity – the way these denominations were governed – not only explain the varied ways Mennonites engaged with the social issues of the twenty-first century, but also explain the rapid decline of the Mennonite Church USA.

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## **Introduction**

Mennonites represent one of the oldest protestant denominations in Christianity. They established beliefs and practices that have been adopted by other Christian groups, many of whom are largely unaware of just how significant a role the Anabaptist forebears of modern Mennonites played in establishing aspects of theology and practice common in more mainstream denominations in the United States, and elsewhere. Despite frequent splintering in the five centuries of their existence, Mennonites remain active around the world and encompass many distinct subgroups – some growing and some declining in number. The most recently organized Mennonite denomination is known as the Mennonite Church USA and was founded by the merger of two separate groups at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

This work seeks to explore the histories of the two denominations that came together, and to examine the challenges faced by the unified body since its inception. This study situates the experience of these Mennonites within the wider religious landscape of the United States and examines the trajectory of the Mennonite Church USA over the course of the twentieth century. Although the study of this denomination has a great importance in and of itself, I seek to use this subject to further develop a broader theme in American life: the interplay between tradition and modernity, and between a conscious desire to preserve one's identity as something separate and apart from the nation's general polity and culture and the desire to be recognized as a legitimate and equal influence in the life of one's own polity and culture. Americans of today are quite familiar with these tensions because citizens of the United States see first-hand the way in which the national debate over issues classed by some as secular are infused with religious imagery and symbolism by others.

The Mennonite Church USA is in a state of rapid numerical decline – a state it found itself in almost from the beginning. Questions of both theology and polity – what the group believes, and how they should be governed – are at play as the Mennonite Church USA struggles with social justice issues that came to the fore in American life in the early twenty-first century, showcasing both the uniqueness of the Mennonite experience, as well as displaying similarities they share with other religious bodies.

Theological debate surrounds almost every major controversy in Mennonite history, and for that reason, theological debates will figure heavily in this study. In the early chapters, the groundwork for how divisions were created along theological fault lines will be examined in light of the work of previous scholars. In the later chapters, where less scholarly work has been done – particularly as it touches Mennonites and the debate about homosexuality, this work will examine how Mennonites have relied on previous theological debates as they have struggled for a way forward. This manuscript also explores general trends in how Mennonites have approached controversy in the past, and how those previous debates and divisions have informed the debate over social justice in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The debate on gender and sexuality has brought sharp decline in the relatively newly merged Mennonite Church USA and may signal the eventual demise of this newly organized denomination. Even so, the debates and divisions over seemingly modern issues have followed well-worn paths carved out in earlier periods of Mennonite history. This current work contributes to Mennonite historiography by examining the debate in the Mennonite Church USA over issues of sexuality and inclusion as well as the very real struggle over polity – the way the denomination is governed. This issue of polity has exacerbated conflict surrounding the LGBTQ community as



well as a debate over the role of women in leadership, controversies that the Mennonite Church USA inherited from its two merging bodies.

Mennonites have long been known, at least in America, as an extremely conservative group. This study will demonstrate both the truth and falsity of that notion. Mennonites have been conservative, and many remain so. Historically, however, the group comes out of a rather progressive wing of the Protestant Reformation, and the spirit of activism that implies has from time to time shown through, as will be demonstrated regarding pacifism, race relations, and issues of gender and sexuality. Mennonites, as I will show, have come down on different sides of all of these issues. The more conventionally conservative have been influenced by religious thought in mainstream America – particularly the rise of fundamentalism, as well as the religious right, adding their own take to those movements. At the same time, the more liberally minded Mennonites have added to their activist heritage approaches and concerns modeled by progressive religious bodies in the United States. Mennonites have much in common with both progressive mainline Christian denominations and more conservative evangelical groups. However, despite the obvious impact of both groups, as well as divisions within Mennonite circles, the Mennonites have remained unique.

The Mennonite Church USA is in a state of numerical decline like many of the mainline protestant denominations in the United States. More traditional Mennonite groups are growing, as are conservative evangelical groups in America. Even so, Mennonites stand apart from both groups. Their origins as a rather radical wing of the Protestant Reformation, and the way in which more liberal elements in the denomination have used this heritage as justification for social justice activism make them stand apart from the mainlines. In the popular mind, Mennonites have long been associated with conservatism, as have many evangelical groups, and

those associations are not without merit. At the same time, Mennonite conservatism has long had a unique flavor to it – distinct to the group. As this work will show, during the twentieth century, this traditional conservatism was challenged by an element in Mennonite circles that adopted a more mainstream conservatism, to the end that within the groups that came to make up the Mennonite Church USA, there were three distinct groups – activists, conservatives with a uniquely Mennonite attitude, and mainstream conservatives in Mennonite circles whose views are more in line with conservative American evangelicals. Conservative evangelical groups are growing in number in the United States. Even so, Mennonites as whole, and particularly Mennonites groups who are experiencing numerical growth, are distinct from conservative evangelicals in this country. All religious groups are complex, but there are added layers in Mennonite circles. While there are elements Mennonites share with other American religious traditions, they continue to stand apart, and the ways in which they have tackled the questions of social justice in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are different in many ways from other religious bodies.

## **Chapter 1 – Mennonites in the Context of Christianity in the United States**

The short history of the Mennonite Church USA is inexorably intertwined with the history of the two denominations that unified to create it. As in all cases, the histories of these three groups – the Mennonite Church, the General Conference Mennonite Church, and ultimately the Mennonite Church USA – did not take place in a vacuum. In order to understand this history, and its significance, it is necessary to situate these denominations within the wider religious landscape they inhabited. To do so, I have chosen to use this first chapter to provide a brief overview of Mennonites broadly, and then to lay out the religious landscape of America, with an emphasis on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the period from which the bulk of the primary research for this project lies.

An exploration of the experiences of other Christian groups in the United States provides a backdrop for analysis of what Mennonites have in common with other groups, as well as what is unique to the Mennonite Church USA. Key topics for comparison include: the conflation of religious and ethnic identity, an issue that became much less pronounced among the Mennonites covered by this work, but one that never entirely disappeared; questions of secular or civic concerns, and how those influence individuals and their religious identity; and finally, how and why religious groups change their focus, and what impact that has on their progression through the groups' life cycles.

This manuscript is a work in the history of religion in the United States. It asks how Mennonites in the United States created a polity that was true to their most important values and intellectual commitments and yet was still a new space for being a citizen of these United States. The Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church, primarily because of their differences in polity, along with their disparate histories, carried with them the seeds of

discord and decline that have plagued the Mennonite Church USA since its inception. Nevertheless, in an attempt to place the Mennonite experience within the larger American religious context, in this first chapter I have included scholarship from a number of disciplines in addition to history, including political science, sociology, and religious studies. I have done so not only to provide a fuller picture of the religious landscape, but also because the social issues these various disciplines explore have had such a lasting impact on the recent history of the Mennonites under consideration. I am persuaded that a brief examination of some of these concerns from additional disciplines makes for a richer understanding of the history they created. Before exploring that larger American religious landscape, I will provide a broad history of Mennonites, along with a brief introduction of the specific denominations being studied.

### **History and Ethnic Origins of Mennonites**

Mennonites are a product of the radical protestant reformation in Switzerland and the Low Countries in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. They are an outgrowth of the Anabaptist movement, and take their name from Menno Simons, a former Dutch priest. Mennonites espoused a literal interpretation of the Bible and separation from the world. Originally, unlike modern fundamentalists, Mennonites had little concern over supposed conflicts between faith and science – their literalism was based in living out the commandments of the New Testament. (As we shall see later, the more anti-scientific version of modern fundamentalism would eventually have a lasting impact on Mennonite history.) As Mennonites originally interpreted scripture, their beliefs entailed a number of customs at odds not only with the Roman Catholic Church, but also other nascent Protestant groups. Perhaps the most immediately discernible break with other Christian groups was the notion of a church made up of voluntary members.

Mennonites believed that it was appropriate to baptize only those individuals who were old enough to request baptism and make a profession of faith – a belief that they shared with other Anabaptists (hence the name, which means “re-baptizers”). Ideas that separated the Mennonites from other groups included an insistence on non-resistance – that is, a refusal to retaliate against abuse. These early Mennonites took seriously the injunction in Matthew 5:38-39 to turn the other cheek.<sup>1</sup> In practical terms, this meant not only that they could not serve in the military, but that they would not use physical force to defend themselves, making them easy targets for both Catholics and other Protestants who viewed them as potential threats, not only to religious order, but also to civil order. An unwillingness to fight made migration the most practical response when conditions became untenable in a particular location. Indeed, migration has been a key facet of the Mennonite experience over the past four and a half centuries.

Other customs that set Mennonites apart from other groups included a separation from what they deemed worldly influences. This translated into a simple, austere lifestyle, although exactly what that meant was often a matter of disagreement, which led to splintering within the group. Mennonites valued the pursuit of purity in belief and practice so highly that they would separate into new groups when serious doctrinal disagreements occurred. Perhaps one of the best-known examples of this schismatic tendency can be seen in the late seventeenth century division that led to the founding of the Amish – a group more widely recognized by the general public for their distinctive dress and limited use of technology. The original division involved a dispute about how literally to interpret the Apostle Paul’s instructs that believers should not eat

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:39, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

with a sinning brother, in an effort to encourage him to amend his ways.<sup>2</sup> In popular parlance, this has come to be called shunning – severing almost all contact with those believed to be in error. A Mennonite Bishop named Jacob Ammann, felt that when a church member had been excommunicated, other members, including family, should sever ties almost completely. Some Mennonites took a less extreme approach. While this was the original reason for the split, the two groups soon diverged on other matters, with the Amish *generally* being more conservative than the Mennonites. But even here, because of numerous divisions in each group, there are now some extremely conservative horse and buggy-driving Mennonites with no electricity, and some highly acculturated Amish with automobiles and advanced technology.

Perhaps one of the most significant contributions of the Mennonite to other religious groups is the idea of adult baptism. While this was considered radical in the sixteenth century, it is now commonplace in Protestant circles. Likewise, the Mennonite idea that church membership should be voluntary, and not connected to citizenship, has become common not only in religious, but also in political ideologies. Mennonites were espousing separation of church and state long before the establishment clause found its way into the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, before Thomas Jefferson’s letter discussing a “wall of separation” between church and state, and before the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights declared that “everyone should have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.”

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<sup>2</sup> I Corinthians 5:11 “But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.”

Because Mennonites moved frequently and over a wide area – indeed, they have spread across the world – they carried their native languages as well as not overtly religious customs with them. Mennonite ideas about separation from worldly influences, as well as their early inability to be politically involved, when combined with their location in new countries/regions, fostered a strong sense of ethnic identity within the groups. To understand later developments, it is important to briefly discuss the major ethnic groupings of Mennonites. Cradle Mennonites – those born and raised in a Mennonite congregation – generally fall into one of two specific ethnic groups/migration streams. As previously noted, the Anabaptist movement had two early centers – Switzerland and the Low Countries. It is from these regions that Mennonites primarily traces their ethnic/linguistic roots.

The Mennonites can be divided into Swiss/High German and Dutch/Low German/Russian categories. While there is some minor overlap, these groups generally followed two very different migration paths, and developed fairly distinct social and cultural practices. The General Conference Mennonite Church, one of the two major denominations that merged to create the Mennonite Church USA, contained congregations from both ethnic groups/migration streams, though Low Germans came to predominate. The Mennonite Church, the other denomination involved in the merger, was predominantly High German. A little history on both groups is helpful in understanding the new denomination they created.<sup>3</sup>

The Swiss/High German group of Mennonites originated in Switzerland, Austria, and the southern area of what would eventually become Germany, as well as Alsace in what is today eastern France. They spoke a dialect of German that is commonly referred to as “High German.”

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed history of the Mennonites, see C. Henry Smith, *Smith's History of the Mennonites* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1981.)

This language was carried with them to the United States, where it morphed into what is today referred to as the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect, a language commonly associated with the Amish. It is from this group that most of the Mennonite migrants to colonial North America came. As a result of persecution, as well as a desire for land, they began migrating in the American colonial period and continued to come into the mid-nineteenth century. These people of Swiss/High German ancestry are historically the most common Mennonite ethnic group in the eastern portions of the United States, as well the more easterly parts of the Midwest.

The Dutch/Low German/Russian Mennonites are the other major ethnic/migration stream. This group originated in the Netherlands and what would one day become the northwestern part of Germany. Their linguistic shifts, as well as their migration patterns are a bit more complicated than those of the Swiss/High German group. One group from this strain migrated to colonial Pennsylvania in the seventeenth century, but they were the exception rather than the rule. Members of this group did not come in large numbers to the United States until much later. Early, also fleeing persecution and seeking land, this group migrated east into Prussia – an area that is mostly in modern Poland. They carried a dialect, commonly called Low German, or Plattdeutsch, with them as their everyday language. They used a more standard version of Dutch for Bible reading and religious services well into the eighteenth century, before switching to the Luther translation of the Bible and a more standardized German for religious services. This group retained Low German as their everyday tongue.

Prussia has a complicated geographic and political history, and Mennonites left the area in separate waves, and for different reasons. In the late eighteenth century, as land in Mennonite settlements became scarce, Mennonites began migrating to the Russian empire (what is today the



Ukraine) at the invitation of Catherine the Great. They were granted religious freedom, which included freedom from military service, as well as land. Because they settled en masse, they transplanted their unique culture with minimal Russian influence. Following the first wave in the late eighteenth century, another mass migration to Ukrainian Russia took place in the early nineteenth century, giving rise to the colloquial names, the “old colony” and the “new colony.” In the mid-nineteenth century, as freedom from service to the government of Prussia became tenuous, a third, much smaller group, migrated to the Volga region of Russia, with promises similar to those offered in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the Mennonites who had relocated to the Ukraine. Once again, they were able to move as a group to a relatively isolated region, and thus to maintain their culture. Later yet, an even smaller group came directly to the United States, settling in Nebraska. Because of varied dates of departure, as well as differences in social class, small linguistic and cultural variations appeared among these Dutch/Low German/Russian Mennonites.

The first major wave of Dutch/Low German/Russian Mennonites to the United States began in the 1870s. These people settled on the Great Plains, with large numbers coming to central Kansas. As land became scarce in the original central Kansas settlement, it served as the source of Mennonite migrants to other states in the central and western United States. Smaller waves of immigration from Russia continued through the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One group came in the 1880s, having first settled in central Asia. Others came as a result of the Russian Revolution. The First World War led to a smaller migration from the United States to Canada in the late 1910s. This particular move had much to do with the harassment the group endured because of their pacifistic stance. While there were issues in several states, the Low German Mennonites seemed to be the primary target, with the worst of

the persecution taking place in the state of Oklahoma. Beginning in the 1920s, some of the more conservative Dutch/Low German/Russian Mennonites in Canada began moving to Mexico because of disputes with Canadian authorities over control of schools. Today, Dutch/Low German/Russian Mennonites can be found in Central and South American, as well in Mexico. The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed something of a reverse migration, with some of these same Mennonites from Latin America returning to the United States and Canada for social and economic reasons.

Having described the two major ethnic strains of Mennonites and having broadly traced their migration paths around the world, it will be useful to briefly examine the splintering and denominational division of these two groups after arrival in America.

### **Denominational History and Structure of Mennonites in the United States**

The Swiss/High German group are the source of many Mennonite subgroups in the United States. The oldest and largest group was known simply as the Mennonite Church. As time went on, and groups began to divide off and form new denominations, they began to be unofficially referred to as the “Old” Mennonite Church. Divisions among these Swiss/High Germans began early, with the first major splinter in the 1780s by a group who sought a more conservative approach to faith and practice. Divisions continued into the twentieth century. To add to the confusion, there were divisions within the Amish beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, with some of those joining the Mennonites and then later still being involved in divisions from the “Old” Mennonite Church. The “Old” Mennonite Church, as such, no longer exists. They merged/reunited with one of the more liberal divisions from the group that had occurred in the mid-nineteenth century, to create the Mennonite Church USA – a group whose

decline is the focus of this work. (The more liberal group will be dealt with separately, when discussing the Dutch/Low German/Russian Mennonite denominations.)

Among the Swiss/High German groups, apart from the Mennonite Church USA, there are a variety of denominations. They are generally more conservative than the Mennonite Church USA. The most conservative among this ethnic stream of Mennonites are commonly referred to as Old Order Mennonites. They are theologically, socially, and technologically conservative. While some groups drive cars, others continue to rely on horse and buggy transportation. They maintain a very distinctive style of dress and are often mistaken for the Amish. Other groups tend to be more technologically acculturated, but remain fairly theologically and socially conservative, and maintain some form of distinctive dress. The last vestige of “plain dress” tends to be the women’s head coverings or “prayer caps.”<sup>4</sup>

Among the Dutch/Low German/Russian Mennonites, there are also a variety of denominations, though there have been slightly fewer splinter groups. The General Conference Mennonite Church broke away from the “Old” Mennonite Church in 1860. This group tended to focus less on outward appearance and favored more local autonomy when compared to the group it left. Interestingly, in the final years before the merger to create the Mennonite Church USA, it was possible to find General Conference congregations that were more conservative, at least theologically, than some “Old” Mennonite congregations – reflecting a difference in polity between the two groups that will be discussed at length in this study. At the time of its founding, the General Conference Mennonite Church was entirely Swiss/High German in ethnic makeup.

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<sup>4</sup> For a thorough examination of the various conservative Mennonite groups of Swiss/High German descent, see: Stephen Scott, *An Introduction to Old Order and Conservative Mennonite Groups* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1996.)

That began to change with the arrival of Dutch/Low German/Russian Mennonites in the late nineteenth century. Many of the congregations made up of these new arrivals joined the General Conference Mennonite Church, so that by the twentieth century, this denomination was somewhat of a mix of both ethnic groups, with the scale tipped toward the Low Germans. Similarly, a group known as the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite – commonly known as the Holdeman Mennonites – broke with the “Old” Mennonite Church. While originally Swiss/High German, they drew some of the more conservative of the Low German Mennonites into their fold.<sup>5</sup>

There were a number of other denominations among the Low German/Russian Mennonites in the United States. The largest group would be the Mennonite Brethren Church. It is almost entirely made up of Dutch/Low German/Russian Mennonites, and this group had separated from the main body of Mennonites well before their migration to the United States. This group stressed personal piety and followed religious customs that were considered foreign to Mennonites in Russia. The Mennonite Brethren group took a much stronger stance against tobacco and alcohol, as well as following a form of church governance that was more similar to Baptist practices. Additionally, also like Baptists, they believed that the only correct method of baptism was by immersion. Mennonite had typically baptized by sprinkling or pouring water over the baptismal candidates’ heads. There were other smaller groups such as the Kleine

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<sup>5</sup> For a brief comparison of the various Mennonite groups in the United States in the twentieth century, see: Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. Revised by Samuel S. Hill (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990.)

Gemeinde and the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren, both of whom had broken from larger Mennonite groups in Russia before coming to North America.<sup>6</sup>

Among the most technologically conservative Dutch/Low German/Russian Mennonites are the Old Colony Mennonites. Their ancestry can be traced to the first large group of Mennonites to go to Russia (hence the name “Old Colony”.) Having come to Mexico in the 1920s, in an effort to remain independent of government oversight of schools, they are the most conservative of the Dutch/Low German/Russian Mennonites. In many ways they are analogous to the Swiss/High German Old Order Mennonites. Many of these congregations have long clung to horse and buggy transportation, although some have adopted mechanized transportation. From Mexico, the most conservative have spread into other parts of Central and South America, while some of the less conservative have begun to return to the Canada and the United States.<sup>7</sup>

The Mennonite Church USA, along with an analogous group called the Mennonite Church Canada, was created in 2002 by the merger of the “Old” Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church, representing two of the largest and most progressive Mennonite denominations in North America. This merger also brought together the two major ethnic streams of Mennonites, although this was already at least partially true of the General Conference group, though the Dutch/Low German/Russian group tended to predominate. In the past two decades, membership in the Mennonite Church USA has declined dramatically, even as

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<sup>6</sup> For a study of the Kleine Gemeinde group see Royden Loewen, *Diaspora in the Countryside: Two Mennonite Communities and Mid-Twentieth-Century Rural Disjuncture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006.)

<sup>7</sup> For a thorough history of the Old Colony Mennonites of Latin America, see: Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.)

membership in the more conservative groups has grown. This mirrors in many ways the trends seen in mainline Christian denominations in the United States.

In 1997 sociologist Fred Kniss published a study of the Mennonite Church entitled *Disquiet in the Land*. This was a play on words in the phrase “the quiet in the land” – a way Mennonites have sometimes described themselves. His central arguments provide insight into conflict among Mennonites that can be applied in various periods of history, including those outside the scope of his study. He argues that the history of Mennonites has been one of almost constant conflict. He situated this conflict as one between “traditionalism” – an emphasis on authority and traditional morality, and “communalism” – creating a just social order. He views these sometimes-competing notions as the source of near constant conflict in the Mennonite Church between the 1870s and the 1980s. He posits three primary areas where these conflicts are best demonstrated, including, (1) disagreements over innovation, (2) questions of authority, and (3) and separation from the larger world.<sup>8</sup> Kniss’s work only dealt with a select regional area within the Mennonite Church, but I believe it has implications for the General Conference Mennonite Church as well. And while his study ends well before the creation of the Mennonite Church USA, his insights are proven out in that new merged body as well and provide a framework for categorizing conflict. I will show how these same areas of concern impact the General Conference group as well as the Mennonite Church USA.

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<sup>8</sup> See Fred Kniss, *Disquiet in the Land: Cultural Conflict in American Mennonite Communities* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997.)

## Mennonite Historiography

Mennonites have a broad historiography. C. Henry Smith is in many ways the father of Mennonite history, having written the first history of Mennonites in America, first as a dissertation, and later as book. He went on to write a number of other works, including what would eventually become *Smith's Story of the Mennonites*. This comprehensive history of Mennonites has gone through a number of revisions and editions in the years since its first iteration as *The Mennonites: A Brief History of Their Origin and Later Development in both Europe and America* in 1920. From the foundations laid by Smith a substantial historical literature has developed.<sup>9</sup>

Royden Loewen and Steven M. Nolt's *Seeking Places of Peace: A Global Mennonite History North America* is perhaps the most recent comprehensive treatment of Mennonites in North America, part of a book series sponsored by the Mennonite World Conference. Theron F. Schlabach, coming out of the Mennonite Church tradition, has written a number of works dealing with various Mennonite related groups coming out of the Swiss/High German tradition, including his most recent work *War, Peace, and Social Conscience: Guy F. Hershberger and Mennonite Ethics*, the biography of an important Mennonite leader who will figure prominently in later chapters as issues of race and war impact Mennonites in the 1950s and 1960s. Coming from a General Conference Mennonite background, James A. Juhnke has written a number of works dealing with Low German/Russian Mennonites, including *Vision, Doctrine, and War: Mennonite Identity: 1880-1930* as well as works dealing with more regionally specific areas such

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<sup>9</sup> Harold S. Bender, "Smith, C. Henry (1875-1948)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1959. Web.. [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Smith,\\_C.\\_Henry\\_\(1875-1948\)&oldid=162309](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Smith,_C._Henry_(1875-1948)&oldid=162309) (Accessed March 15, 2021.); Smith, *Smith's Story of the Mennonites*.

as *A People of Two Kingdoms: The Acculturation of Kansas Mennonites*. Both Schlabach and Juhnke have also written many items for the Mennonite press, some of which will be referenced in later chapters.<sup>10</sup>

There have been additional specific studies, such as Royden Loewen's *Family, Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and New Worlds, 1850 – 1950*, which explores the way a specific group of Low German Mennonites from Russia sought to maintain their identity and culture, even as they embraced a more market driven economy. After arrival in North America, the group began to experience competition from other Mennonite groups in the area, and divisions in the once rather homogeneous group began to appear. As time went on, social changes, based on changing economic reality, further weakened once strong bonds of tradition, particularly in the second generation after settlement. These forces of change from both overtly religious corners, as well as from seemingly more secular sources clearly show how traditions, values, and even identities change. Loewen traces further changes within this group in *Diaspora in the Countryside: Two Mennonite Communities and Mid-Twentieth Century Rural Disjuncture* as he shows both increasing acculturation, as well as traditionalist push back.<sup>11</sup> This present manuscript looks at similar forces and trends as they relate specifically to the Mennonite Church, the General Conference Mennonite Church, and their successor group, the Mennonite Church USA. Additionally, there are other regional, and even congregational level, local histories, some

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<sup>10</sup> Royden Loewen and Steven M. Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace: A Global Mennonite History* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2012); Theron F. Schlabach, *War, Peace, and Social Conscience: Guy F. Hershberger and Mennonite Ethics*. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2009); James C. Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity in America, 1890-1930*. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989) ;James C. Juhnke, *A People of Two Kingdoms: The Acculturation of Kansas Mennonites* (Newton: KS Faith and Life Press, 1975.)

<sup>11</sup> See Royden Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993); See also Loewen, *Diaspora*.



of which I have relied on to flesh out the ideas presented by these more broadly based scholarly works, and some of which I have made use of in my own analysis.

Topically specific works have been written by several authors on a variety of issues, including pacifism and peacemaking. Some of the more prominent works have included Perry Bush's *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties: Mennonite Pacifism in Modern America*, as well as Leo Driedger's and Donald Kraybill's *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism*. Rachel Waltner Goossen has written about pacifism from a gender specific perspective in her *Women Against the Good War: Conscientious Objection and Gender on the Homefront, 1941-1947*, where she explores the history of women in the CPS program – an iteration of the Depression Era CCC camps that focused on using conscientious objectors for public service in lieu of military duty. Luke S. Martin has specifically addressed the role of aid workers in *A Vietnam Presence: Mennonites in Vietnam during the American War*.<sup>12</sup>

Paul Toews more broadly explores Mennonites in the mid twentieth century United States in his *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970: Modernity and the persistence of Religious Community*. Looking at the same era, Tobin Miller Shearer has written extensively on issues of race in *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries*, where he explores the role Mennonites played during this crucial period, showing both the courage of some Mennonites, as well as the limits beyond which some members of the group were unwilling to cross. Miller has also written several articles dealing with racial issues

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<sup>12</sup> Perry Bush, *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties: Mennonite Pacifism in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Leo Driedger and Donald Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994); Rachel Waltner Goossen, *Woman Against the Good War: Conscientious Objection and Gender on the American Homefront, 1941-1947*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); also Luke S. Martin, *A Vietnam Presence: Mennonites in Vietnam During the American War* (Morgantown, PA: Masthof Press, 2016.)

and civil rights leaders, including Vincent Harding, who will figure prominently in Chapter 4 of the present work.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of a history of the Mennonite Church USA, relatively little has been written. An historical account of the issues faced by the Mennonite Church USA is one of the contributions of my work. Little of a scholarly nature has been written about the debate over polity in the new denomination, and that is an area the current manuscript seeks to address. In doing so, I have relied heavily on the debate in the Mennonite press. In 1995, Kerry Strayer wrote a dissertation exploring the lead up to the merger entitled “Structural Change and Cultural Continuity: The Movement toward Integration in Two Mennonite Denominations,” which I have used as a starting point in exploring the newly created Mennonite Church USA. Ervin R. Stutzman, who became the executive director of the Mennonite Church USA in 2010, provides some history of the new denomination as well in *From Nonresistance to Justice: The Transformation of Mennonite Peace Rhetoric, 1908-2008*, which evolved from his dissertation of a similar title. While the focus of that work is the Mennonite Church, the later parts of Stutzman’s work do touch on the role of the former Mennonite Church in the new body.<sup>14</sup>

Another area where my work enlarges the historiography of Mennonites is in the discussion of issues of gender and sexuality. The historical literature on the debate over homosexuality in Mennonite circles is scant. Stephanie Krehbiel addressed the issue in her 2015 dissertation entitled “Pacifist Battlegrounds: Violence, Community, and the Struggle of LGBTQ

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Toews, *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970: Modernity and the persistence of Religious Community*, (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1996); Tobin Miller Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010)

<sup>14</sup> Kerry Strayer, “Structural Change and Cultural Continuity: The Movement Toward Integration in Two Mennonite Denominations, PhD. Diss., University of Texas, 1995; Ervin R. Stutzman, *From Nonresistance to Justice: The Transformation of Mennonite Church Peace Rhetoric, 1908-2008*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2011.

Justice in the Mennonite Church USA.” In Chapter 6 of the current work, I again make extensive use of the Mennonite press to explore the debate surrounding the inclusion of homosexuals among the Mennonites. More has been written about the struggle of women in Mennonite circles, including Rachel Waltner Goossen’s “Mennonite Bodies: Sexual Ethics: Women Challenge John Howard Yoder” which deals specifically with abuse involving a Mennonite theologian who was prominent in the wider Christian world in the 1970s. My work not only explores issues of abuse and intimidation in the newly merged denomination, but also situates the struggle of women in leadership in relation to struggle for LGBTQ equality.<sup>15</sup>

### **Religious Landscape in America**

In order to establish my own framework for situating the Mennonites in relation to other protestant denominations in the United States, I have relied on variety of works, including that of Rodger Finke, a professor of sociology and comparative religion at Pennsylvania State University and Rodney Stark, University Professor of Social Sciences at Baylor University. The duo’s award-winning work, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* first published in 1992, and later updated in 2005, challenges long-held notions about church growth in America. The authors’ initial aim in writing the book was to explain the how and why of increased church membership in the United States following the American Revolution. The pair claim that at the time of the Revolutionary War, few people in

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<sup>15</sup> Stephanie Krehbiel, “Pacifist Battlegrounds: Violence, Community, and the Struggle for LGBTQ Justice in the Mennonite Church USA” PhD Dissertation, (University of Kansas, 2015); Rachel Waltner Goossen “Mennonite Bodies: Sexual Ethics: Women Challenge John Howard Yoder” in *Journal of Mennonite Studies* Vol 34, 2016

the colonies took part in organized religion, whereas almost two-thirds of Americans did at the time of publication.<sup>16</sup>

As Finke and Stark traced the growth of participation in organized religion in the United States, they became concerned with questions about why certain Christian denominations grew, while others dwindled in number. As the authors looked further into these issues, they began to find evidence that many pronouncements that were commonly accepted, such as various periods of religious decline in America, were misrepresented.<sup>17</sup> Because the Mennonite Church USA was in decline from its inception, I found this work useful for comparative purposes.

Challenging received interpretations raises controversy, and *The Churching of America* was no exception. The first edition of the book received a great deal of praise, particularly from sociologists including Andrew Greeley and Phillip Hammond. Hammond described it as “a wonderful, refreshing addition to the literature of both sociology of religion and the history of American religions.” This work won the Distinguished Book Award from the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in 1993. At the same time, a number of criticisms were leveled at it. Some, such as those by religious historian, and then editor of *Christian Century*, Martin E. Marty, were rather scathing, while others, such as those of Mark Noll offered more nuanced critique.<sup>18</sup>

Marty Martin is perhaps one of the best-known religious historians in the United States, having written over a dozen well received works of religious history, spanning a wide range of

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<sup>16</sup> Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Finke and Stark, 1-4

<sup>18</sup> Finke and Stark, xviii-xix; Phillip E. Hammond, *Sociology of Religion* 54, no. 3 (1993): 318-19; Peter Steinfelds, Beliefs, New York Times, February 20, 1993.

topics from his *Martin Luther*, dealing with doubtlessly the most famous leader from the Protestant Reformation, to his *A Short History of American Catholicism*, to *The Christian World* which traces the history of Christianity from first century Palestine across two millennia and six continents.<sup>19</sup> In his review of *The Churching of America* he had this to say: “Reductionism is the name of their game.” Marty continues:

Finke and Stark’s world contains no God or religion or spirituality, no issue of truth or beauty or goodness, no faith or hope or love, no justice or mercy; only winning or losing in the churching game matters.

While allowing that most religious historians do sometimes make use of market terms, Martin holds that Finke and Stark go too far: “Adam Smith and Social Darwinism are nuanced compared to these two...” Finally, making use of what he sees as their predilection for terms like winner and loser, he closes with: “the score for Finke and Stark can be reduced to Winning, 0; Losing, 3.”<sup>20</sup>

While criticisms from noted religious historians, particularly as pointed as those leveled by Marty Martin, would seemingly discourage use of Finke and Stark’s work in a project such as this, I found the pair’s premise of a marketplace (see below), as well as their implied discussion of the life cycle of religious groups, presented in a rather simple and straightforward manner, to be a useful tool for looking at the Mennonite Church USA. As I will show, the authors were clear about their purposes, and upfront about the scope of their work – they were not providing a definitive religious history, they were presenting an explanation for growth and decline.

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<sup>19</sup> Marty Martin, *The Christian World: A Global History*, (New York: Modern Library, 2007); Marty Martin, *Martin Luther: A Life*, (London: Penguin Books: 2004); Marty Martin, *A Short History of American Catholicism*, (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1995.)

<sup>20</sup> Marty Martin, “The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy,” *The Christian Century* Vol. 110, no. 3 (1993): 88-89.

As shown, one major criticism of the authors was their emphasis on a market economy model to describe the religious landscape in America. The duo uses such terms as “organizational structure,” “sales representatives,” “products,” and “marketing techniques” to describe the growth and decline of religious bodies in the United States. The authors were quick to explain that the use of such terms was in no way a suggestion that the content of the various religious groups was unimportant. Indeed, they focus a great deal on just how important doctrinal content is on whether a denomination “wins” or “loses” in the “marketplace.” Another criticism of the work includes the fact that it is not exhaustive and does not cover every important topic and individual that have influenced American religion. The authors anticipate this and explain that their purpose was not to produce a general historical account of religion in America, but to provide a framework with which to correct widely held misconceptions. They acknowledge that many groups receive little to no mention, including the Mennonites. Their goal is to provide specific details that showcase their explanation for growth and decline.<sup>21</sup> It is in that spirit that I make use of their ideas.

The authors assert that like most organizations, Christian denominations have a lifecycle of birth, growth, decline, and death. This assertion is largely implicit. Finke and Stark make reference to H. Richard Niebuhr, and his 1929 work *The Social Source of Denominationalism*, in which he attempts to explain why there are so many schisms among churches, resulting in so many denominations. As Fink and Stark interpret Niebuhr, the answer to this question is the ability of these many groups to fulfill a wide variety of human needs, which the authors immediately draw back to the idea of a marketplace. Groups meeting the most commonly perceived needs grow, while those that do not, decline. This idea of a life cycle is most clearly

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<sup>21</sup> Finke and Stark, xvii-xix, 23-24.

born out in Finke and Stark's fifth chapter, in which they chart the growth and decline of the Methodist movement in America compared with the more-steady growth of the Baptist movement. The authors argue that as the Methodist group prospered, they became less distinct from the mainstream culture, and less able to posit themselves as an alternative to a more liberal and less religious mainstream, thus losing market share, so to speak, to the Baptist, who were better able (at least in the South) to maintain a more distinct identity (one more demanding of their members), and thus continued to grow. Finke and Stark point out the growth of splinter factions within Methodism such as the Free Methodists and the Holiness movements of the nineteenth century as proof that mainstream Methodism was not meeting the perceived need of strict enough religious requirements for members.<sup>22</sup> This pattern provides an interesting point of comparison as I trace the period of decline in both the Mennonite Church and the later Mennonite Church USA in later chapters. This splintering from a declining main body as that body becomes less demanding of members and less distinct from the wider culture will also occur in Mennonite circles.

While Stark and Finke drew ire for their work from prominent historians, they were hardly lone voices. Sociologist William S. Bainbridge and economist Laurence Iannaccone, (whose work will be discussed below) were also early proponents of looking at religious growth and decline using a marketplace framework. R. Laurence Moore's 1994 *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* uses these same ideas. He says plainly: "In our times, it is hard to imagine a religious organization whose operations are totally outside a market model." This trend has continued in the years since these individuals first promoted this idea. In 2015,

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<sup>22</sup> Finke and Stark, 44-46, 156-196: See also H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Source of Denominationalism*, (New York: Henry Holt, 1929.)

Oxford University Press published an edited volume entitled *Religion and the Marketplace in the United States*, a collection of 11 essays exploring the notion that religion can be successfully examined using a marketplace-based approach. These individual chapters run the gamut from Hilde Lovdal Stephens' "Money Matters and Family Matters: James Dobson and Focus on the Family: Traditional Family and Capitalist America" which shows explicit connections between the religious right and the economic policies of the Reagan years, to Katja Rakow's "Religious Branding and the Quest to Meet Consumer Needs: Joel Osteen's 'Message of Hope.'" As the title implies, Rakow describes popular religion in modern America in overtly economic terms, coining such words as "pastorpreneur" to describe the mix of religious faith and business marketing exemplified by Houston, Texas megachurch leader Joel Osteen.<sup>23</sup> While some of these scholars fall outside the discipline of history, their approach provides an additional useful means of exploring religion from an historical perspective.

Despite perceived periods of religious decline, the people of North America were and remain religious. If anything, the trend has been toward a growing religiosity. The decline that has often been lamented is actually a decline within specific denominations, and generally fails to take into account a corresponding rise in membership in other denominations. For example, Warren H. Wilson claimed that the rural population was in decline in the early twentieth century, and that it was leading to an oversupply of rural churches that would have to be closed or

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<sup>23</sup> See Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987); R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994,) 274; See Jan Stievermann, Philip Goff, and Detleff Junker, eds. *Religion and the Marketplace in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Hilde Lovdal Stephens, "Money Matters and Family Matters: James Dobson and Focus on the Family on the Traditional Family and Capitalist America" in *Religion and the Marketplace in the United States*, eds. Jan Stievermann, Philip Goff, and Detleff Junker, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 102-122); Katja Rakow's "Religious Branding and the Quest to Meet Consumer Needs: Joel Osteen's 'Message of Hope'" in *Religion and the Marketplace in the United States*, eds. Jan Stievermann, Philip Goff, and Detleff Junker, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 216.



combined. Statistical analysis does not bear out such a claim. The number of people in rural areas actually grew (as a total number – not by percentage) during this period. Additionally, the number of rural churches actually increased. Distorted views such as these are the product of the unintended biases of the people making such claims. Mainline churches in rural areas were experiencing decline, but evangelical churches were growing. It was often the case that individuals from mainline groups made such claims, including Warren H. Wilson, a denominational leader in the Presbyterian Church – one of the denominations experiencing decline.<sup>24</sup>

In a related vein, during the period that Reverend Wilson was lamenting the decline of rural churches, his fear that churches would have to combine strikes on a salient point. It is often the case that declining churches (and denominations) *do* combine. What Wilson and others had missed was the fact that growing churches (and denominations) *do not* combine. Groups that are growing believe that there are *substantial* theological differences between themselves and other groups, and that they should actively seek new members.<sup>25</sup> In this way, the Mennonite Church USA, the product of a merger of two denominations already in numerical decline, fits squarely within the pattern of mainline denominations that have combined, including the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church USA, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

According to Finke and Stark, and those they cite, there are several reasons why some conservative groups grow while mainline groups decline. Scholars such as Laurence

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<sup>24</sup> Rodger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America: 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005, 205-206.

<sup>25</sup> Fink and Stark, 206-208. These scholars used data that had been collected by sociologists H. Paul Douglass and Edmund Brunner to arrive at this conclusion.

Iannaccone, claim that despite the seeming paradox, high demands on members, along with strict boundaries between members and those outside, are a key ingredient in growth. While not a guarantee of growth, it seems such conditions are often a necessary component. These conditions often do not exist in mainline groups for several reasons. For one, a certain strong set of beliefs are often no longer a central element of faith in mainline groups. Secondly, established religious groups tend to mimic peer institutions. Growth has historically been greatest for “outsider” groups. Thirdly, clergy in well-established groups are more constrained by professional position and denominational rules.<sup>26</sup>

Religious and legal scholar Dean Kelley, in his book *Why Conservative Churches Grow*, explores aspects of religious activity that tend to correspond with growth. Among his findings were the following general principles: Members of growing churches are serious about their faith and are unwilling to entertain or adopt new beliefs if those new beliefs conflict with already established beliefs and practices. Growing churches tend to make high demands on those who join the group and hold members to high standards as a condition for maintaining membership. Additionally, members of growing religious movements are vocal and unapologetic about the role of their belief system in their interactions with others. These groups have a certainty about the rightness of their belief system, and a commitment to mission that is often lacking in mainline groups.<sup>27</sup>

Kelley cites Anabaptists (the ancestors of the Mennonites) and early Wesleyans (the forerunners of modern Methodists) as examples of this approach. This is of particular note, as

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<sup>26</sup> Finke and Stark, 235-283; Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); See also Laurence Iannaccone “Why Strict Churches are Strong” *American Journal of Sociology* 99 (1994): 1180-1211.

<sup>27</sup> Kelley, 125-129.

the United Methodist Church, like the Mennonite Church USA, is currently in a period of decline. Interestingly enough, while the merged denomination the Presbyterian Church USA is in decline, a much more conservative breakaway group, the Presbyterian Church in America, has grown significantly. In keeping with the Kelley's theory, this group espouses a stricter form of Calvinist doctrines and church governance, practices that marked early Presbyterianism.<sup>28</sup> While more conservative groups of Mennonites do share many of the characteristics Kelly and Iannaccone identify, most of these groups *generally* do not actively seek converts and rely on retention and high birthrates for their growth.

When looking at the decline of mainline denominations and the growth of more conservative evangelical groups, a common theme emerges. While both mainline and more conservative evangelical groups are in agreement with the most basic tenets of Christianity, these groups tend to focus on very different things. Mainlines tend to focus on the here and now, while the conservative evangelicals are more focused on life after death. This focus on eternal destiny makes the more conservative groups much more apt to focus extensively on evangelism when compared to the mainline groups. A certain level of religious uncertainty comes into play as well. As Finke and Stark say, "Innovations for spreading a plan of salvation are largely irrelevant if you have doubts about the plan."<sup>29</sup> Without aggressively seeking converts, as older members die, the mainline groups shrink, in market share, if not in total number.

The evangelical focus on salvation is clearly concerned with the souls of individuals. Mainline denominations have tended to put community ahead of the individual, whereas the order is generally reversed in conservative evangelical groups. This individual-centered approach

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<sup>28</sup> Kelley, 125-129, 176; Finke and Stark, 235-283, Mead, 202-203.

<sup>29</sup> Finke and Stark, 252.

has proven more successful at gaining and retaining members.<sup>30</sup> Despite the seeming paradox of an individual's religion coming before the religious community, that is the way most Americans have come to view the situation. Evangelical denominations promote a more radical individualism in matters of faith, and the mainline denominations are either unwilling or unable to effectively compete.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, a focus on the community over the individual has always been prominent in Mennonite thought, *particularly* among the more conservative, growing Mennonite groups – though the individualism of early twentieth century American fundamentalism made substantial inroads even among conservative Mennonites. While this would seem to counter current scholarship regarding other Christian groups, the ethnic component, coupled with a high birthrate, among conservative Mennonites introduces a factor that has very little comparative experience among many of the Christian groups represented in the literature regarding mainline denominations.

This focus on individuality is clearly tied to larger trends in American society. Following World War II, the rank-and-file *members* of mainline churches believed that most of the major world evils (the Axis defeat, for example) had been solved, and that it was time to focus on the purification of the individual self – a position that was not shared by the mainline clergy. This inward focus on personal fulfilment meshed well with the growing compartmentalization of modern life and was a good fit for evangelical religious belief and practice.<sup>32</sup> As sociologist Robert Wunthrow argues, in the postwar period, the idea of promoting morality was shifting away from creating moral communities and focusing instead on preparing individual members to

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Bacher and Kenneth Inskeep, *Chasing Down a Rumor: the Death of Mainline Denomination* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 69.

<sup>31</sup> Bacher and Inskeep, 70-71;

<sup>32</sup> Bacher and Inskeep, 71-72; Robert Ellwood, *1950: Crossroads of American Religious Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000,) 194.

be more morally committed. At the same time, rising mobility and higher incomes were eroding the former sense of loyalty to denomination.<sup>33</sup>

This same trend toward the individual can be clearly seen in the changing role of women's groups in mainline Christian circles. The perception among many mainline women's groups is that younger women are more interested in spiritual connection and uplift as a counter to the business of modern life, something they would be more apt to find at a ladies Bible study in an evangelical church. This perceived emphasis on self within the mainline women's groups has met with a variety of opinions and responses. On one side you have the more traditionally service minded (community above individual), who view such desires as self-absorbed spiritual narcissism. Others, while still committed to public service and advocacy, take a different view. They look at how women's groups within the more visible conservative evangelical world, such as Women of Faith and the Women's Missionary Union (Southern Baptist) meet these needs and consider meeting such desires as a successful way to recruit. Many of these individuals see value in expanding the spiritual curriculum within their groups, not just for the spiritual refreshment of members, but as a segue into encouraging new members, who are now having *their* spiritual needs met, into more emphasis on world missions and social justice advocacy.<sup>34</sup>

### **Ethnic and Religious Identities**

One area in which Mennonites share similarities with other ethnic groups is a tendency to conflate their religious and ethnic identities. This is in many ways a product of their many

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<sup>33</sup> Bacher and Inskip, 72-73; Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988,) 55-57.

<sup>34</sup> Wade Roof, *Spiritual Market Place: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999,) 57; Robert R. Wuthnow, *Restructuring* 55-57, R. Marie Griffith, "The Generous Side Christian Faith: The Successes and Challenges of Mainline Women's Groups, in *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*, eds. Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002,) 80-107.

migrations and social isolation for their first two to three centuries (longer for some.) Timothy L. Smith, a noted historian who dealt with issues of religion as well as immigration has touched on this issue. In his 1978 article “Religion and Ethnicity in America” he recounts the role that religion plays on identity formation in ethnic groups. While he does not discount the close connection of the two, he also claims that eventually the religious aspect of identity outweighs the ethnic components and mentions Mennonites specifically.<sup>35</sup> These strong connections between ethnic background and faith, as well as Mennonite attempts to reach beyond them, will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

Roman Catholicism has also often been closely associated with particular ethnic groups, and thus can serve as something of a bridge in discussing this issue with Mennonites. As the various immigrant generations of Roman Catholics began to lose cultural distinctives such as ethnic languages, separate social status, shrinking family sizes, and a distinct political affiliation, they also began to lose religious distinctives. At the same time, as a result of Vatican II reforms, “cost” issues, such as no meat on Friday, became optional. With the liturgy of the mass in English, it suddenly seemed very similar to what the Episcopal Church was doing. At the same time, Catholic higher education had become much more secular.<sup>36</sup> While there are distinct doctrinal differences between Roman Catholics and the Mennonites, there are also several similarities. The loss of cultural distinctives among more acculturated Mennonites, particularly in the former Mennonite Church, resulted in the more theologically conservative members seeking another group. There may or may not have been an ethnic identity component also

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<sup>35</sup> Timothy L. Smith, “Religion and Ethnicity in America,” in *The American Historical Review* Vol. 85 No. 5, 1978, 1161, 1178-1180.

<sup>36</sup> Finke and Stark, 265-262.

pushing for an exit from the denomination. This issue will be explored in some depth in Chapter 5. Either way, the net result was not insignificant loss for the Mennonite Church.

In addition to the ethnic component, issues of sexuality are another area of commonality between Roman Catholics and the Mennonite Church USA. The official teaching of the Catholic Church is two-fold. Homosexual activity is viewed as a moral sin. Homosexual inclination/orientation is described as disordered, but not a sin. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that homosexuals are to be treated with respect, but that homosexual actions are viewed as wrong. The position of Rome, and the United States Conference of Bishops, is opposition to homosexual priests, same-sex marriage, and adoption of children by homosexuals. Despite this official position, there is a fair amount of dissent from both priests and laity at the local level. Indeed, survey data indicates that lay Catholics are less likely to condemn homosexual activity than are protestants, whether evangelical or mainline.

It appears that over time, support of civil rights for homosexuals as well as support for same-sex marriage is growing among rank-and-file Roman Catholics. Political scientist Ted Jelen argues that the Catholic leaders and the laity are increasingly at odds over issues of sexual diversity.<sup>37</sup> In Catholic circles, top leaders oppose sexual diversity even as local parishes are more accepting. This same trend can be seen in the Mennonite Church USA. While the official denominational position is that homosexual activity is a sin, some ministers and congregations push back strongly against this.<sup>38</sup> The result is turmoil in the denomination. The most liberal on

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<sup>37</sup> Ted G. Jelen, "Catholicism, Homosexuality, and Same-Sex Marriage in the United States," in *Faith, Politics, and Sexual Diversity in Canada and the United States*, eds. David Rayside and Clyde Wilcox (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011,) 207-218.

<sup>38</sup> Religion News Service. Largest group of Mennonite Church leaves denomination. January 2, 2018 (accessed December 4, 2020) <https://religionnews.com/2018/01/02/largest-group-of-mennonite-churches-leaves-denomination/>; Religion News Service. Mennonite Church coming apart over sexuality issues. June 9, 2016. (accessed December 4, 2020) <https://religionnews.com/2016/06/09/mennonite-church-coming-apart-over-sexuality-issues/>

this issue are critical of the denomination for not giving full and open acceptance to homosexuality, while the most conservative are angry with the denomination for not doing more to rein in the more liberal congregations who are openly affirming. The net result is that almost no one is happy. This will be examined in greater depth in Chapter 6. This dynamic is also apparent within mainline circles.

### **Secular Issues and Religious Identity**

As has just been shown, whether or not ethnic identity has been conflated with religious identity, secular concerns can sometimes appear to overtake the religious identity of churches. The argument can be made that such has been the case with mainline churches in the United States. Sociologists John Wilson and Thomas Janoski have looked at religious influence on social activism as expressed through volunteering. While their work is primarily focused on the volunteer aspect of service, their conclusions are applicable to the social activism that propels the volunteering. The highest rate of volunteerism occurs among Jews, followed by Roman Catholics and liberal (mainline) Protestants. Rates of volunteerism were lower among conservative evangelical Protestants. One reason for this difference has to do with the changes in focus described earlier. Conservative Protestants have more of an otherworldly focus and are more likely to expend energy on evangelism, while liberal Protestants have a greater focus on the here and now.<sup>39</sup> This tension between this world and the world to come can be seen among Mennonites and the varied stances of members and congregations on pressing social issues. These issues will be examined in Chapters 4 and 5, as debate over race-based civil rights and the Vietnam War confront the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church.

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<sup>39</sup> John Wilson and Thomas Janoski, "Contribution of Religion to Volunteer Work," *Sociology of Religion* 56 (1995) 137-152.



Increased concern over secular issues, particularly as they relate to social justice issues, is often mirrored by an increase in the public visibility of churches. The public presence of congregations within the mainline branches of American Christianity are decidedly different than that of other Christian groups. For example, mainline churches are more likely to encourage connections between congregations and those outside the church. These mainline groups are also much more likely to promote educational activity, engage in social service projects, work across denominational lines, and encourage parishioners to expose themselves to the arts. Surprisingly, data does not indicate that the mainlines are more likely to engage in politics, when compared with other Christian groups. Interestingly, these trends remained the same without regard to the demographics of individual congregations.

Sociologists Mark Chaves, Helen M. Giesel, and William Tsitsos posit a number of possible reasons to explain the more distinct type of public presence of mainline congregations. Among these reasons are that many mainline groups have roots in European state churches, differing views of institutional policies, and less of an otherworldly focus when compared to more conservative evangelicals. Additionally, mainline protestants have traditionally dominated civil society in America. <sup>40</sup> Mennonites have never dominated civil society in any large metropolitan areas (one could argue for a modified domination in some extremely rural areas of Pennsylvania, the Midwest, and Canada.) Mennonites were also never a state church, but then neither were Methodists. However, the other characteristics, and possible explanations for them,

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<sup>40</sup> Mark Chaves, Helen M. Giesel, and William Tsitsos “Religious Variations in Public Presence: Evidence from the National Congregations Study” in *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*, Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans, ed. 122-124. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002; See also Robert Wuthnow, “Mobilizing Civic Engagement: The Changing Impact of Religious Involvement,” in *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, eds. Theda Skocpol and Morris P Fiorina (Washington DC: Brookings Institute Press, 1999): 331-363. See also, Peter Dobkin Hall, “Religion and the Organizational Revolution,” in *Sacred Companies: Organizational Aspect of Religion and Religious Aspects of Organizations*, eds. N.J. Demerath, Peter Dobkin Hall, Terry Schmitt, Rhys H. Williams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.)

provide a good framework for comparison to the Mennonites in terms of their stance on civic issues.

Understanding what some scholars, such as Robert Bacher and Kenneth Inskeep, have dubbed the “American Community” helps to explain the public engagement of the mainlines. In many ways, the 1950s were crucial years for mainline denominations. The division between the more traditional “fundamentalist” (evangelical) and more “modern” (mainline) Christian groups in the 1920s put the mainline denominations in a unique position. Many leaders in mainline denominations saw themselves as a guiding force in America, one which would create an “American Community.” Central to this concept was the notion of America as a holistic, peaceful, just society led by ecumenical Christians. Despite the ecumenical nature of this proposed society, it was not pluralistic in the modern sense. This imagined community was very much white, upper middle class, and not intended to be confrontational. The *Christian Century* was the primary voice of the combined mainline identity, and it promoted the “American Community.” All of this began to come apart in the 1950s.<sup>41</sup>

The values of the “American Community” faded as a perceived possibility in the 1950s, and with it the strength and power of the mainline groups, such that they were in a position of attempting to maintain their status, as opposed to leading the nation. A number of factors explain this decline. The fear of communism and the emergence of the civil rights movement at the center stage of American life during the cold war exposed an ugly underside of the United States that did not comport with peace and justice. At the same time, people on all sides of these issues felt that they could no longer trust the government, which flew in the face of a holistic just

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<sup>41</sup> Bacher and Inskeep, 62-64.

society. In a similar vein, mistrust of big business was growing as well. While all of this change was taking place, evangelicals began to assert themselves, with a great deal of success. All of these factors helped to discredit the mainline denominations that had fought so hard to create this “American Society,” leaving them on the defensive.<sup>42</sup> These same concern for social justice will become evident in the two bodies that will eventually combine to form the Mennonite Church USA, as we shall see. At the same time, the more traditional individuals, congregations, and even regional conferences within the denominations, evidenced concern that a civic identity was subsuming the religious identity of the group in ways that they viewed as sinful. While there were uniquely Mennonite characteristics, the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church experienced 1950s and 1960s America in much the same way as many mainline protestant groups.

### **Civic Engagement and Religious Identity**

Looking at the experiences of mainline denominations is instructive for understanding the Mennonite Church USA through a comparative lens. There were, and are, clear and compelling religious reasons for civic engagement. However, it has often been the case that such engagement has privileged the civic identity at the expense of religious ones. The debate in the Mennonite Church USA over issues surrounding homosexual marriage, a topic that will be addressed in Chapter 6, shows some variation on this issue. People on both sides of the debate see it as a religious issue, not simply a civic concern.

Another key to understanding the decline of mainline denominations and the corresponding growth of conservative evangelical groups is the role of politics, including the rise

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<sup>42</sup> Bacher and Inskeep, 67-68.

of the religious right, the pro-family movement, changing views on sexuality, and the use of media by various religious groups to promote their views. Just as these have been central issues in the growth of conservative evangelicals and the decline in membership in mainline congregations, they have also proven divisive among Mennonites.

As historians Daniel Williams and Matthew Bowman have demonstrated, the roots of the modern Christian right are much older than the Moral Majority that supported Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. The origins of the Christian right lay in the modernist/fundamentalist controversies of the 1920s. Conservative Christian support of William Jennings Bryan, a three-time candidate for president, whose last public action was to fight against the teaching of evolution in the famous *Scope's* trial, showed the beginnings of an evangelical alliances with politics. In this case, the conservative Christians – the forerunners of the Christian right – supported the Democratic party. That support waned after the party selected Al Smith for their 1928 candidate for president, but their political involvement did not simply fade away. If political advocacy diminished somewhat after the Great Depression began, the precedent had none-the-less been set for fuller engagement in later years.<sup>43</sup>

The conservative Christian alliance with the Republican party coalesced in two stages prior to the 1970s. In the first stage, evangelicals saw the Republican party as the best defense against the spread of communism. In this era, they supported the Republican party, but had little control over its policies. In the 1960s and 1970s, the focus turned to cultural issues, such as feminism, pornography, and abortion. Through a united front, conservative Christians not only

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<sup>43</sup> Daniel Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010,) 1-3; See also William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996); See also Kenneth J. Heineman, *God Is a Conservative: Religion, Politics, and Morality in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); See also Ruth Murray Brown, *For a "Christian America": A History of the Religious Right* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002); Bowman, 108-132.

supported the Republican Party, but began to shape its agenda. This was aided in no small part by demographic shifts that favored evangelicals as the century progressed.<sup>44</sup>

Interestingly, at roughly the same time, another influence was entering evangelical circles, and in some ways attempting to mediate against the drift to the right. Noted religious historian Mark Noll, has argued that Mennonites were also beginning to influence thought and practice within evangelical circles in postwar America, but notes that influence is a two-way street:

Especially after World War II, Mennonite contacts broadened to the point where they exercised a telling influence on the shape of evangelical social ethics, even as evangelical norms modified some aspects of historic Mennonite separatism.<sup>45</sup>

This dynamic will be addressed more specifically in Chapter 3 of the present work.

Though not the genesis of the movement, the late 1970s was an important stage in the development of the Christian right. Indeed, various wings within the evangelical Christian community coalesced during this period.<sup>46</sup> Even so, Mennonites were also exerting influence of their own:

... evangelicals harvested the fruits of their own broadening mosaic. John Howard Yoder's *Politics of Jesus* (1972) was a book by a Mennonite, but was directed toward a non-Mennonite audience. Its advocacy of uncompromising pacifism has not by any means carried the day among evangelicals, but was a landmark effort that has led to much more serious consideration of Jesus' own life as the norm for political behavior.<sup>47</sup>

Yoder's work and impact will be further discussed later in the present work.

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<sup>44</sup> Williams, *God's Own Party*, 4-10.

<sup>45</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994, 216); Perry Bush, "Anabaptism Born Again: Mennonites, New Evangelicals, and the Search for a Usable Past, 1950-1980" *Fides Historia* 25 (Winter/Spring 1993): 26-47.

<sup>46</sup> Williams, *God's Own Party*, 7, 160-186.

<sup>47</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal*, 223-224.

An understanding of the Christian right is helpful in understanding a growing three-way division among Mennonites that will first be addressed in Chapter 2, and then continue to grow in succeeding chapters. This issue, insofar as the different ways the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite dealt with it, will have a direct impact on the Mennonite Church USA, as described in Chapter 7.

### **Sexual and Religious Identities**

As noted earlier, increased interaction with sexual minorities by people of faith is leading to a more accepting attitude in religious circles in the United States, but this issue has been fraught with conflict. Significantly, the debate about homosexuality prefigures the debate about other sexual minorities currently taking place.<sup>48</sup> Understanding the beginning stages of an ever-increasing awareness of sexuality and gender issues is vital, as this has been a hot button issue for the religious right.

This debate goes to the heart of several issues important to all parts of the wider Christian community. How is the Bible to be understood? What is the responsibility of the created to their creator? How is the relationship between sex and reproduction to be understood? What constitutes a family?<sup>49</sup> The answers to these questions have implications well beyond the issue of what gender represents or what is the nature of a person's sexual orientation.

A brief summary of how mainline denominations have dealt with this issue is helpful in understanding how the Mennonite Church USA, and the denominations that merged to form it,

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<sup>48</sup> David Rayside and Clyde Wilcox, "The Difference that a Border Makes: The Political Intersection of Sexuality and Religion in Canada and the United States," in *Faith, Politics, and Sexual Diversity in Canada and the United States*, eds. David Rayside and Clyde Wilcox (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011,) 8. [[ 3-25]]

<sup>49</sup> Laura R. Olson, Paul A Djupe, and Wendy Cadge, "American Mainline Protestantism and Deliberation about Homosexuality" in *Faith, Politics, and Sexual Diversity in Canada and the United States*, eds. David Rayside and Clyde Wilcox, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011) , 265.

have handled these concerns. The 1969 Stonewall riot served as a catalyst for the mainlines to begin to officially engage with this topic. The United Church of Christ was the first to produce an official statement, in which they sought an end to discrimination against homosexuals and a decriminalization of homosexual acts. Other mainlines began issuing statements in the following decade. Most of these statements condemned homosexual behaviors as sinful, while supporting civil rights for gays. This would be fairly close to the official position of the Mennonite Church USA. The debate over the ordination of homosexuals began in the mid-1970s with some mainlines supporting such a move and others opposing it. This debate continued for decades. Even as ordination issues raged on, the 1990s saw the debate widen to include religious services to recognize same sex relationships, with similarly disparate responses. While the mainlines all had vocal factions on both sides of the debate, during the later twentieth-century the vast majority of mainline congregants remained silent on the issue and refused to mobilize for either side.<sup>50</sup>

According to political scientists Laura R. Olson and Paul A Djupe, as well as sociologist Wendy Cadge, the mainline debate on this issue contributed significantly to the public debate about homosexuality. The mainlines provided a forum for discussing these issues. At the same time, they engaged in relatively civil discussions of the issue. There were various factions, all of whose points of view were given a sense of legitimacy by being given a voice. In other words, they provided the wider culture with an example of how to approach this issue, and I would argue, other related issues, in the following century.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, this has coincided with a

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<sup>50</sup> Olson, Djupe, and Cadge, "American Mainline Protestantism", 267-273.

<sup>51</sup> Olson, Djupe, and Cadge, 275-283. (There have been some break-away groups in the early twenty-first century that cite acceptance of homosexuality as cause. See Anglican Church in North America, "About" <http://www.anglicanchurch.net/index.php/main/About/> (accessed August 3, 2018).

decline in membership, and what would appear to finally be an irreparable rupture in the United Methodist Church.

According to political scientist John Pierceson, many of the early claims of rights made by sexual minorities were based on the right to privacy found in the Fourth Amendment, as well as equal rights protections found in many state constitutions as well as the federal one. Conservative pushback against such claims is demonstrated in the use of the initiative and referendum at the state level to counter such claims.<sup>52</sup>

Issues of gender beyond gender identity have also been points of political conflict. According to R. Marie Griffith, Director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis, women's organizations have long played a significant role, not only in Protestantism in general, but in American life as a whole. The challenges faced by such groups within mainline denominations mirrors the challenges faced by mainline churches as a whole. Mainline women's groups have vanished from the spotlight. Like their denominations, they have been eclipsed in the media by more vocal and visible groups from the more conservative evangelical wing of Christianity. Additionally, they are also often overshadowed by secular feminist groups, such as the National Organization for Women and the Feminist Majority – groups that share at least some of the same concerns, including greater social and legal protections for women and children.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> John Pierceson, "Law, Sexuality, and Morality in the United States," in *Faith, Politics, and Sexual Diversity in Canada and the United States*, eds. David Rayside and Clyde Wilcox (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011,) 339-353.

<sup>53</sup> R. Marie Griffith, "The Generous Side Christian Faith: The Successes and Challenges of Mainline Women's Groups," in *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*, eds. Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002,) 80-107.



Another problem faced by these women's groups is resistance from within the denomination. The flexibility in belief and practice within mainline denominations means that both conservatives and liberals are under the same umbrella, which leaves whatever stance taken by women's groups vulnerable to criticism. Similarly, the national denominational leadership often lacks a clear understanding of what the goal and role of their affiliated women's groups is or should be – a confusion at times shared by the women themselves.<sup>54</sup>

Another problem for women in mainline denominations is their changing roles, both within the church and within society. Attracting and maintaining membership in women's groups has become increasingly difficult for several reasons. Women who work outside the home often find the time commitment of membership to be a barrier. Additionally, the increased access to official positions of ministry within mainline denomination has decreased the pool of available and interested women. Many women who would previously have been found in unpaid, volunteer leadership roles in these organizations have entered ordained, paid ministry within their respective groups.<sup>55</sup> This issue of women in ministry, and the divisiveness it brought, as well as the role of women in advocacy on a number of issues among Mennonites will be explored in some detail in Chapter 7.

A movement that identified itself as being explicitly and avowedly "pro-family" developed among conservative evangelicals in the United States. Among the issues energizing the pro-family movement was a rise in divorce and out-of-wedlock births in the later twentieth century, and their perceived detrimental effect on children. The mainlines have failed to create a

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<sup>54</sup> Griffith, "Generous Side", 84-86, 93; Laura R. Olson, "Mainline Protestant Washington Offices and the Political Lives of Clergy" in *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*, eds. Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 54-79.

<sup>55</sup> Griffith, "Generous Side", 82-84, 93-95.

compelling “public family ethic” when compared to the evangelical wing of Christianity. Some scholars credit this failure with a misplaced mainline focus on social justice issues, but not all scholars accept that narrative. While admitting that it captures one dimension of the issue – “expressive liberation” – it fails to account for “progressive familism.” Expressive liberation deals with social justice and self-fulfillment, while progressive familism focuses on families, but with an emphasis on egalitarian two-parent families with children – like a 1950s era family that has accepted the basic tenets of feminism. Perhaps their failure to create a compelling public ethic surrounding the family is that both of these views are reflective of the white upper-middle and upper classes that make up the bulk of mainline membership.<sup>56</sup>

The mainlines have attempted to reach out to families, via progressive familism, with limited success. Progressive familism was seen as a middle way between expressive liberation of the left and the family values agenda of the religious right. This involves the idea that a two-parent family is the norm but includes a tolerant acceptance of families that depart in some way from this norm – prefiguring a debate among Mennonites about a “Third Way” of looking at non-traditional families as explored in Chapter 6. It strongly asserts the equality of men and women, and emphasizes family related ministries – premarital counselling, religious education for children, and support for divorced people. This can be seen in the high rate of programs for children and in the large number of church-sponsored daycare centers. Some scholars such as Peter J. Thuesen believe the challenge the mainlines face is not their ethics regarding the family

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<sup>56</sup> W. Bradford Wilcox, “For the Sake of the Children? Family-Related Discourse and Practice in the Mainline,” in *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*, eds. Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002,) 287-316; See Don S. Browning, “Religion and the Family Ethics: A New Strategy for the Church,” in *Work, Family, and Religion in Contemporary Society*, eds. Nancy Ammerman and Wade Clark Roof (New York: Routledge, 1995.)

but simply their lack of media savvy in explaining the virtues of their methods.<sup>57</sup> One particular challenge to the mainlines in regard to their progressive familism is maintaining the tension between promoting strong stable families, a means of maintaining vibrant congregations, and supporting the tolerance and freedom they have long championed, which sometimes mediates away from traditional families. This second stance has resulted in declining membership. Statistics show that people in traditional family structures are more likely to be members of mainline congregations than are people living in different arrangements.<sup>58</sup>

Religious groups go through a fairly predictable pattern of growth and decline, with new groups springing up from the remains of previously strong bodies. Like others before them, the Mennonite Church USA is in a state of decline. While there is a cultural or ethnic component to all religious groups, it is more pronounced with some. In this sense, the groups that later joined to form the Mennonite Church USA have much in common with the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, at least in the earlier days of the Catholic Church. It has often been the case in the mainline world that civic concerns have overshadowed religious concerns, though in Mennonite circles the “civic” often becomes part of the “religious”—showcasing a tension between orthodoxy and orthopraxy that has long been a feature of Mennonite life. Changes in focus often predicate decline, and once again the Mennonite Church USA is experiencing this phenomenon. Political involvement has often divided mainline groups from their more conservative evangelical counterparts, with mainlines focusing on social justice, while evangelicals show more concern about personal morality. The Mennonite Church USA and the

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<sup>57</sup> Peter J. Thuesen, “The Logic of Mainline Churchliness: Historical Background Since the Reformation,” in *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*, eds. Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002,) 27-53.

<sup>58</sup> Wilcox, “Sake of the Children”, 301-312.

two denominations that came together to create it have struggled, and are struggling, with both of these impulses, which has contributed to their decline.

### **Structure of Study**

The purpose of this study is to situate the experience of the Mennonite Church USA, and the two denominations that came together to create it, into the context of the broader pattern of religious life in the United States. It also seeks to explore, through the histories of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church, how certain conflicts ever present in Mennonite circles were held in tension (or not) in both groups prior to unification, and how those same issues contributed to the rapid decline of the Mennonite Church USA after the merger. Among the top areas of conflict were the competing impulses of activism and conservatism (related to Kniss's emphasis on disagreements over innovation), engagement versus a closed community (akin to Kniss's discussion of separation from the world), and questions of correct belief and practice (which touches on both Kniss's arguments about separation from the world, and questions of authority.)

In Chapter 1, I have briefly traced the ethnic history of the Mennonites, introduced the specific denominations under consideration, and outlined the basic theory of the life cycle of religious bodies, utilizing works from historians, sociologists, political scientists, and religious scholars. I have also introduced some major social issues that intersect with religion and that have shaped religious change in the last twenty-five to thirty years in the United States. In Chapter 2, I examine how the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church dealt with changes in the religious landscape of America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as discussing the impact of the First World War on these groups. This chapter also introduces the beginnings of what will eventually become a three-way division

among Mennonites, and that division will have long term consequences. In Chapter 2, I will be utilizing secondary sources in describing changes in Mennonite practice as the group engages with wider American culture. I make use of the Schowalter Oral History Collection from Bethel College to show the impact of the First World War on Mennonites, as well as to analyze the writings of Mennonite Bishop Daniel Kauffman, as I explore the impact of fundamentalism on the group. Chapter 3 explores how the World War II experience for Mennonites differed from the previous war, as well as examines the theological basis for a renewal of Mennonite activism that would occur later in the century. In this chapter I make use of primary source material from the Civilian Public Service camps, analyze the Anabaptist Vision as described by Mennonite leader Harold S. Bender, and situate my understanding of this era in the context of the work of Mennonite scholars of the period. The various responses of Mennonites to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and the divisions it highlighted, are discussed in Chapter 4. In this section of the work, I make use of materials from the Mennonite press of the era, as well as examine the writings of Vincent Harding, a prominent African American leader in Mennonite circles at that time. I also utilize the work of scholars who have explored the impact of the civil rights movement on Mennonites. The Vietnam War, and its impact on Mennonites is explored in Chapter 5, where I again make extensive use of the Mennonite press, from both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church, to chart the debate this conflict engendered. Chapter 6 provides an in-depth examination of the division in Mennonite circles brought about by the mainstream debate on homosexuality, both before and after unification. This portion of the study relies heavily on debate in the Mennonite press, both online as well as in print, to chart this era of conflict. Chapter 7 explores the division over church polity in the Mennonite Church USA, and how that served as a constant backdrop to conflicts over issues of

social justice in the early twenty-first century, relying on not only on the Mennonite press, but also on official denominational statements. Finally, I present a brief concluding chapter situating the decline of the Mennonite Church USA within the history of Mennonites, and the larger Christian tradition in the United States.

## **Chapter 2 – Mennonites From 1870 Through the End of the Progressive Era**

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked an era of intense upheaval in the United States as well as in the world at large. Mennonites were deeply impacted by the changes in this period, and the seeds of conflict that would eventually tear at the fabric of the Mennonite Church USA were already manifesting themselves in this period. This chapter, particularly in its first section, is largely narrative. The changes of the nineteenth century help to explain how the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church came to share common ground with other religious bodies in the United States, and how many of the issues they struggled with at this time were common to religious groups in the country as a whole. I will rely on the work of religious historians of the United States such as Edwin Gaustad, Christopher Evans, and Douglas Sweeney, as well as Mennonite historians such as David Haury, Rodney James Sawatsky, and James Juhnke to flesh out the history of Mennonite in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This narrative section serves to bring Mennonites into the Modernist/Fundamentalist controversy at the turn of the twentieth century as well as into the First World War – both of which had long term consequences for both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church. From there, primary source materials are utilized, as these two events are key in sparking changes that will have a direct impact on the eventual merger that created the Mennonite Church USA, as well as its rapid decline.

In discussing the Modernist/Fundamentalist controversy I will closely examine the writings of Daniel Kauffman, a Mennonite leader who had a major impact on the Mennonite Church, and who helped usher in currents of fundamentalism that would have profound impacts on the group and would eventually lead to a three-way ideological division among Mennonites.

In exploring the impact of the First World War, I will be making use of interviews taken from the Schowalter Oral History Collection at Bethel College in Kansas. These interviews include both Mennonite civilians and Mennonites drafted into the First World War who served in some capacity. Their stories are key in understanding the changing Mennonite response to the United States government in later wars, and they help to explain the changing iterations of the pacifist doctrine that would become apparent by the time of the Vietnam Conflict.

### **The Threat and Promise of Religious Innovations**

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a time of growth for the General Conference Mennonite Church. Indeed, the General Conference group was birthed in 1860. From a very small (three congregations) beginning, the groups grew rapidly with the influx of immigrants from Russia, as well as from natural demographic growth. The story of the Mennonite Church is more complicated. The creation of the General Conference Mennonite Church was only one of many schisms in what would come to be known as the Mennonite Church. Although membership numbers from this era are difficult to obtain, one could argue that the Mennonite Church, at least in the mid to late nineteenth century, was in a state of decline. Indeed, in writing of the time period between 1840 and 1890, Harold S. Bender said: “At times it seemed that the main body might be so weakened by the struggle and the defections right and left that it would completely disintegrate...” He goes on, however, to claim that outstanding leadership “did much to turn the tide” late in the period, and that by the 1920s “the church was transformed” with the merger of some independent Mennonite conference and some former Amish groups. It must also be remembered that this was an era in which large family sizes played significantly into natural growth. By 1930 one can assert that both denominations



were still in a growth cycle. Much of the controversy in the Mennonite Church in the late nineteenth century was elicited by the acceptance of religious innovations such as will be described in this chapter.<sup>59</sup>

The innovations that sparked such controversy among Mennonites in the mid to late nineteenth centuries included revival meetings, Sunday Schools, and mission programs. These same issues had proved divisive among other Christian groups in the United States as well, albeit at an earlier time period. Revival meetings have a long history in the United States and are connected to both division and the creation of new religious groups. A distinction is sometimes made between “evangelistic” meetings, which are geared toward converting people, and “revival” meetings which are aimed at convincing the already converted to be more devout. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both aims were often combined, and the names came to be used interchangeably, with “revival” becoming quite common.<sup>60</sup>

Jonathan Edwards and his famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is a well-known example of the revivalism in New England that was a part of the First Great Awakening in early eighteenth-century America. This movement led to division between “new lights” who favored the evangelical nature of the movement and were less concerned about a strict interpretation of Calvinism, and the “old lights” who were suspicious of the possibility of excess in such meetings coupled with a fear of rejecting traditional Calvinist doctrine. This movement created conflict among both Congregationalists and Presbyterians. The development

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<sup>59</sup> Edmund G. Kaufman and Henry Poettcker. General Conference Mennonite Church (GCM). *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. (Accessed December 14, 2020) [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=General\\_Conference\\_Mennonite\\_Church\\_\(GCM\)&oldid=167711](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=General_Conference_Mennonite_Church_(GCM)&oldid=167711); Bender, Harold S. Bender and Beulah Stauffer Hostetler. “Mennonite Church (MC)” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. (Accesses July 22, 2020.) [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite\\_Church\\_\(MC\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite_Church_(MC))

<sup>60</sup> Harold S. Bender, “Revival” in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Vol. 4 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1959), 308-319; Kniss, *Disquiet*, 25-26.

of the Methodist Church in America – a group that followed the teachings of John and Charles Wesley, and that eventually separated from the Church of England – was also influenced by revival meetings conducted by the likes of missionary George Whitefield.<sup>61</sup>

The Second Great Awakening, starting in post-revolutionary America, and continuing well into the nineteenth century, continued to utilize and expand revival meetings. This second movement was more widespread and longer lived. One of the outstanding features of this era of revival was the “camp meeting” – a prolonged series of outdoor religious revival meetings. This style of evangelism and revival was most commonly associated with the Methodists, but also utilized by Baptists and some Presbyterians. Perhaps the most famous camp meeting took place in Kentucky just after the turn of the nineteenth century. Some scholars point to this as a forerunner of the Pentecostal revival of the early 1900s, though opinion on that point is mixed. What is agreed upon is both the notoriety of this camp meeting, and the way it spawned new religious groups. The Restoration Movement, which birthed the Disciples of Christ/Christian Church and the Church of Christ, has roots in this camp meeting. A further division among Presbyterians also grew out of this event. Presbyterians had already been divided between the old light and new light factions. This latest breach resulted in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. While Presbyterians were well known for their well-educated clergy, congregations on the frontier found it difficult to attract seminary trained leaders. One of the key features of the Cumberland Presbyterian group was allowing ministers who lacked formal training to lead congregations.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Christopher H. Evans, *Histories of American Christianity: An Introduction* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 65-86.

<sup>62</sup> Douglas A. Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story: A History of the Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 70-74; Evans, *Histories*, 111-130; Mead, *Handbook of Denominations*, 72-74, 75-76, 198-210.

Such evidence confirms that upheaval over the content and scope of social and religious change is not a unique feature of twentieth century life, and that it has been a part of the evolution of Christianity at large. The same proved true among Mennonites, just at a later period. The first attempts at using revival meetings among Mennonites occurred in mid 1800s, and were opposed, and associated with divisions within the church. The first officially sanctioned use of revival meetings in the Mennonite Church did not occur until the early 1870s under the leadership of Daniel Brenneman in Indiana, and John F. Funk in Pennsylvania. Brenneman was later expelled from his congregation for his vigorous insistence on evangelism, including the use of revival meetings. John S. Coffman, beginning in the late 1870s, was able to use revival meetings within the Mennonite Church with minimal disruption, such that by the turn of the century it was largely accepted within the denomination, though it was not universal until the early 1920s. Despite their adoption, these revival meetings had a uniquely Mennonite flavor.<sup>63</sup>

Interestingly, the situation within the General Conference Mennonite Church was a bit different. During this era, the General Conference group tended to describe itself as the more progressive of the two denominations. Leaders such as Cornelius Wedel, the president of Bethel College, a General Conference institution in Kansas, asserted that the General Conference churches were based on a personal faith in Jesus Christ, and were less dogmatic, but more pious, when compared to congregations of the Mennonite Church. He also felt that the Mennonite Church was overly concerned with what he considered cultural minutia (dress regulations, etc.) at the expense of true spiritual renewal. This stress on a personal faith would seem to mediate toward ready acceptance of revival meetings. However, use of revival meetings among the

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<sup>63</sup> Bender, "Revival", 308-310; Kniss, *Disquiet*, 25-26.

General Conference group, particularly in the west, did not become commonplace until well into the twentieth century, and when they were initially introduced, they were a source of some contention, particularly when making use of mainstream staples of revival meetings within the larger Christian culture, such as altar calls. Altar calls are invitations for people in the audience to come forward to make a profession of faith in Christ, or to repent and rededicate themselves to Christ and his service. This reluctance toward revival meetings may point to the more recent immigration of the Dutch/Low German/Russian Mennonites who made up a large portion of the General Conference Mennonite Church in the west. Having been in America only since the 1870s, at the earliest, they had less experience with mainstream Christianity in this country when compared with Mennonites in the east. Additionally, there had been a major rupture among Mennonites in Russia in the decades before large scale migration to the United States and Canada. The more evangelistic Russian Mennonites left the main body to form what would become the Mennonite Brethren Church. The Mennonite Brethren had been influenced by the Moravian Brethren as well as by German Pietism. The Mennonite Brethren group stressed personal conversion, strict discipleship, and a different form of baptism. This new group generally considered themselves to be more pious, and relations with other Mennonites were sometimes strained. This group, along with other Russian/Low German Mennonites, began coming to North America in the 1870s. Mennonite Brethren made ready use of revival meetings, which may also have made the General Conference Mennonites of the same ethnic background view them with suspicion.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Mead, *Handbook*, 152; Wilma McKee, "Customs and Convictions in the Churches" in *Growing Faith: General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma*, ed., Wilma McKee (North Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1988), 119, 124; David Haury, *Prairie People: A History of the Western District Conference*, North Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1981), 268; Bender, "Revival", 308-310; J. H. Lohrenz, "Mennonite Brethren Church" in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* Vol. 3 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1957), 595-602.

Sunday Schools, another controversial innovation, had originated in England in the late eighteenth century as a means of providing moral instruction to the children of factory workers, and were very much a product of the industrial revolution. Sunday Schools were seen as a means of uplift for the lower classes. Soon the movement spread to North America. In 1824, the American Sunday School Union was founded in Philadelphia as a national organization to promote the establishment of Sunday Schools for the destitute throughout the United States. Eventually, the notion of Sunday Schools began to shift away from a class-based identity toward an idea of Sunday School as a universal institution for all classes, but this was a slow shift. It was not until the mid-1840s that any group recognized Sunday School as an official denominational program.<sup>65</sup>

There was initially opposition to Sunday Schools in some quarters of mainstream American Christianity. Many viewed Sunday Schools as a man-made, unbiblical innovation that has no place in the church. It created such strain that some denominations split over it, among other issues. Baptists provide perhaps the best example. During the 1830s, American Baptists divided into factions, including the “Primitive” Baptists and the “Missionary” Baptists. There were a number of issues dividing the two groups, but the conducting of Sunday Schools was one of the major points of contention, with the “Missionary” Baptists favoring Sunday Schools, while the “Primitive” Baptists opposed them. Similar divisions occurred in the Restoration Movement, with the Disciples of Christ/Christian Church and the larger body of the Church of

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<sup>65</sup> Harold S. Bender and Cornelius Krahn, “Sunday School” in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* Vol. 4 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1959), 657-660.

Christ favoring Sunday Schools, while a splinter Church of Christ group colloquially known as the “Antis” opposed them.<sup>66</sup>

Sunday Schools proved to be a source of contention among Mennonites as well, though again, the controversy here came a bit later. While a handful of Sunday Schools developed as early as the 1840s among Mennonites in the east, they were not permanent. The first permanent Sunday School programs among congregations that would remain in the Mennonite Church, after the division that created the General Conference Mennonite Church, did not develop until the 1860s. Opposition arose within some quarters of the denomination on a number of grounds. Some felt that Sunday Schools were not sanctioned by the Bible. Others complained that they were modeled on the practices of other religious groups and were thus “worldly” and not appropriate for “true” Christians, while still others expressed concerns that they were led by the laity, and thus might veer into heresy without appropriate ministerial oversight. Some of the most conservative eventually left over the Sunday School question, along with a host of other disputes, to create what came to be known as various Older Order Mennonite groups. It was not until almost the turn of the century that Sunday Schools were common in the more conservative conferences of the Mennonite Church, and they were not universal even after 1900.<sup>67</sup>

Sunday Schools were adopted in the Swiss/High German congregations of the General Conference Mennonite Church as soon as they divided from the Mennonite Church. In fact, some of the congregations that broke away to form the General Conference had already established Sunday Schools before the official division in 1860. As the Dutch/Low German/Russian Mennonites began to arrive in the western United States in the 1870s and

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<sup>66</sup> Mead, *Handbook*, 51-52.

<sup>67</sup> Bender and Krahn, “Sunday School,” 557-560; Scott, *An Introduction*, 12-27; Kniss, *Disquiet*, 22-25.

beyond, they established Sunday Schools fairly quickly. While Sunday Schools were a fairly common feature of both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church by the early 1900s, their adoption had had been quicker and less controversial among the more progressive General Conference group.<sup>68</sup>

Missionary efforts were also a divisive issue in mainstream Christian groups in America, as well as among Mennonites. Missionary activity among Christians in America has a long history. Puritans Thomas Mayhew and John Eliot are two of the better-known individuals who attempted to convert Native Americans in the seventeenth century, for example. The Church of England, as well as the Moravian Brethren, led missionary endeavors around the world, including North America, such that the idea of missionary work was not a foreign concept in America, even in the colonial period. Americans had previously taken an active role in British missionary efforts, but by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Americans were forming their own missionary societies such as the Connecticut Missionary Society and the Massachusetts Missionary Society. By the mid-1820s these two groups had combined efforts to create the American Home Missionary Society. The focus of this group was church planting and the distribution of Christian literature in the expanding west, with an emphasis on both American settlers and Native Americans. In 1808 the Society of the Brethren was founded by Williams College students for the purpose of spreading the gospel overseas, and two years later members of the group went on to found the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission (ABCFM) – the country’s first sending agency for international missions. While the ABCFM was a product of the Congregational Church, as Puritans in America had come to be known, other denominations were soon creating mission agencies of their own. Some, like the United

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<sup>68</sup> Bender and Krahn, “Sunday School,” 557-560; David A. Haury, *Prairie People*, 280.

Foreign Missionary Society were cross denominational – in this case a joint effort by the Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed Churches – while others, such as the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States of America for Foreign Missions, were denomination-specific, as their name makes clear.<sup>69</sup>

The rise of mission programs was not met with universal admiration or acceptance in all American churches. The greatest division over missionary efforts occurred among Baptists. While the rift was ultimately precipitated by a controversy over mission work, as with most splits there were a number of underlying issues. Sunday schools as a source of division among Baptists has already been mentioned, but at a deeper level, specific doctrines were being contested. There has long been disagreement among Baptists over predestination – a doctrine espoused by John Calvin. Those who believed that God has predetermined the eternal destiny of people were Calvinist, while those who believed that humans have free will, followed more closely the teaching of Jacobus Arminius. This had been a long-standing point of dispute among Baptists, going back to at least the 1630s. While differences are more nuanced than space permits in this study, a good generalization is that “general” Baptists favored the doctrine of free will, while “particular” Baptists favored the doctrine of predestination. This tension was highlighted by the idea of supporting missionary efforts. Those who believed in free will – the idea that people could chose to accept Christ, naturally favored missions, with the stricter Calvinists voicing reservations.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Sweeney, *The American Evangelical*, 79-89, 91; Mead, *Handbook*, 36; Edwin Gaustad and Leigh Schmidt, *The Religious History of America: The Heart of the American Story from Colonial Times to Today* (New York: Harper One, 2002), 266.

<sup>70</sup> Mead, 34-35.



Soon after the formation of a Baptist mission board in 1814, specific regional associations of Baptist congregations began to voice dissent. The Kehukee Association of North Carolina issued a statement condemning all “authoritarian societies” as contrary to the teachings of Christ. For them it was not simply the idea that mission work was incompatible with Calvinism, but that it was also a question of autonomy, as the language of their statement makes clear. Soon other regional associations were making similar pronouncements. The Black Rock Association of Maryland issued a statement in 1832 known as the Black Rock Address. It has come to be viewed as something of a defining document for those dissident Baptists who eventually came to be known as Primitive Baptists. In this address, they voice their opposition to organized mission programs, Sunday Schools, revival meetings, which they refer to as protracted meetings, and seminaries.<sup>71</sup> Although the theology is different (Mennonites are decidedly not Calvinist), the conservatism of Primitive Baptists is in some ways analogous to the more conservative elements in the Mennonite tradition.

Missions efforts also created controversy among American Mennonites. This issue follows a trajectory similar to that of the previous newly introduced religious innovations. Again, the controversy came later to the Mennonite tradition. Opposition was voiced, but mission programs were eventually accepted, more quickly among the General Conference Mennonites, and more slowly in the Mennonite Church. One aspect that does not fit the pattern as clearly is the fact that the Mennonites’ European antecedents had been very evangelistic and open to mission work. Indeed, F. H. Littell argues that Anabaptist mission work foreshadowed modern missionary efforts in several ways, including Anabaptist missions program’s focus on

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<sup>71</sup> Mead, 51-52; The Primitive Baptist Webstation, “The Black Rock Address,” <https://web.archive.org/web/20150128022640/http://www.pb.org/pbdocs/blakrock.html> (accessed July 17, 2019).

not using coercive means of conversion. Anabaptist missionaries believed that the “Great Commission” applied to all Christians at all times. Also, Anabaptist missions relied heavily on the laity. Mennonites had lost their early missionary zeal after coming to North America. Such a turn of events is hardly surprising given the fact that almost all Mennonites, whether the Swiss/High Germans who came early, or the Dutch/Low German/Russians who came later, settled in insular communities where a language gap, coupled with a fear of outside influence, left them isolated in many ways from the larger culture, at least initially.<sup>72</sup>

Serious efforts at missionary work undertaken by Mennonites in America started in the mid-nineteenth century in conjunction with the introduction of Sunday Schools and a push for better education and training for ministers. Several churches in eastern Pennsylvania eagerly adopted this mindset. These same congregations led the movement that created the General Conference Mennonite Church in 1860. For the mass of Swiss/High Germans who remained in what came to be known as the Mennonite Church, mission efforts came later. John F. Funk and John S. Coffman, who have already been mentioned in conjunction with bringing revival meetings and Sunday Schools into widespread use in the Mennonite Church, were also instrumental in creating an active mission program within the denomination. These two men had a knack for being able to maintain the support of the more conservative element of the Mennonite Church, even as they slowly introduced new practices. The Mennonite Evangelizing

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<sup>72</sup> S. F. Pannabecker, “Foreign Mennonite Missions” in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* Vol. 3 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1957), 712-717; See F. H. Littell, “Anabaptist Theology of Missions” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 21 (1947): 5-17 for his complete argument; The Great Commission is a phrase familiar to most evangelical protestant Christian, and is taken from Matthew 28:19,-20 and reads: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Committee was created in 1882 and eventually morphed into the Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities in 1905.<sup>73</sup>

Mission programs were much more readily accepted in the General Conference Mennonite Church. As previously stated, the most vocally mission-minded congregations among the Swiss/High German group had led the movement to create the General Conference Mennonite Church on the eve of the Civil War. Indeed, one of the first endeavors of the new denomination resulted in the creation of the Wadsworth Institute in Ohio. Although the school operated for only a little over a decade, it had a profound impact on mission efforts in the General Conference Mennonite Church. Conceived of as a Mennonite institution of higher education, Wadsworth was staffed by European Mennonites who had close connections with a missionary program undertaken by Dutch Mennonites, originally in conjunction with Baptists, to the inhabitants of modern-day Indonesia. The first graduating class from Wadsworth included Samuel S. Haury, the first missionary sent out by the General Conference Mennonite Church. In 1872, the General Conference group created the Foreign Mission Board, and proceeded to send Haury to the mission field. He did extensive work among the Cheyenne and Arapaho people in Oklahoma Territory, which in turn opened up the opportunity for work among other Native American groups. By the early 1900s, the General Conference Mennonite Church had established missions not only among Native Americans, but also in various parts of Asia.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Pannabecker, "Mennonite Foreign Missions" 712-717; Kniss, *Disquiet*, 31.

<sup>74</sup> Pannabecker, "Mennonite Foreign Missions" 712-717; S. F. Pannabecker, Wadsworth Mennonite School, " in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* Vol. 4 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1959),866-867; Harold S. Bender, "Dutch Mennonite Mission Association" in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* Vol. 2 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1956), 113-114; C. Nijdam and W. F. Golterman, "Java" in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* Vol. 3 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1957),99-103; For an extensive look at General Conference Mennonite missionary efforts among Native Americans, see Lawrence H. Hart, "Arapaho and Cheyenne meet the Mennonites" in *Growing Faith: General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma*, ed., Wilma McKee (North Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1988), 14-37;

Among the Dutch/Low German/Russian migrants filling the ranks of the General Conference, this same favorable attitude toward missionary efforts prevailed. As early as 1877, a mere two years after the first Low German Mennonites arrived in North America, a group of Kansas congregations expressly stated, “missions are the task of every Christian.” David A. Haury asserts that an emphasis on missions was one factor in drawing this group into the General Conference. Although Samuel Haury was not of Low German background, Mennonites who were of that ethnicity were soon active in missions among Native Americans as well, sometimes in cooperation with the federal government.<sup>75</sup>

### **Mennonites and Mainstream American Christianity**

Theological debates within the context of mainstream America Christianity also had a great influence on both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church, and unlike issues such as revival meetings, Sunday Schools, and mission efforts, the impact was not nearly as delayed. It may be that the adoption of those innovations, coupled with the rise of Mennonite higher education, helped Mennonites catch up, at least in some areas, with the issues then current in Christianity at large. While the Wadsworth Institute did not survive, a number of colleges sponsored by Mennonites developed around the turn of the century. This is an interesting development in its own right. In Anabaptist circles higher education has long been viewed with suspicion. They have traditionally interpreted 1 Corinthians 3:18-19 as a prohibition on advanced education. “Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become ‘fools’ so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight.” The Amish and the most conservative

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<sup>75</sup> Haury, *Prairie People*, 160; Minutes of the Kansas Conference, November 15, 1877, Item 21, Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, KS.; Horn, “Acculturation,” 12.

Mennonites still oppose anything beyond the most basic level of schooling. In the Mennonite Church, as well as the General Conference Mennonite Church, it came to be believed that the foolishness of the world mentioned in these verses was not a wholesale prohibition on education, and that when properly conducted, a college education could be beneficial. True to form, the General Conference Mennonite Church took the lead in this endeavor, opening Bethel College in Kansas. The school was incorporated in 1887 but did not officially open until 1893. Once again, the Dutch/Low German/Russian influence can be seen. Russia was the first country where Mennonites had developed anything resembling a systematic form of education with their own schools. It is only natural that they would be accepting of a specifically Mennonite institution of higher learning, though suspicion of higher education did not completely die out and would resurface in the second and third decades of the new century, as the confrontation between modernists and fundamentalists found its way into Mennonite circles. Bluffton College in Ohio, an area where the General Conference Mennonite Church was mostly of Swiss/High German background, was founded in 1898. Within the Mennonite Church, Goshen College in Indiana was founded in 1903.<sup>76</sup>

Revivalism was once again taking center stage in America. Dwight L. Moody was probably the most well-known evangelists of the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. Not only did Moody engage in revivalist preaching at home and abroad, he also went on to found a school in Chicago in 1889 that would come to be known as the Moody Bible Institute, which has been a major force in

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<sup>76</sup> I Corinthians 3:18-19a; Haury, *Prairie People*, 94-98, 233-238; Menno S. Harder, "Mennonite Education" in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* Vol. 2 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1956), 150-153; John S. Umble "Goshen College" in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* Vol. 2 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1956), 546-548; C. Henry Smith, "Bluffton College" in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* Vol. 1 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1955), 368-370.

American Christianity since that time.<sup>77</sup> Moody had a direct impact on both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church. John Funk, already cited as a progressive voice in the Mennonite Church, was a close associate of Dwight L. Moody in the early and mid-1860s and considered Moody to have been a major influence on his life and ministry. Funk, eventually a Bishop in the Mennonite Church, was the founder of what would become the Mennonite Publishing Company, giving him a public platform with wide reach. He influenced many in the Mennonite Church through publications such as the “Herald of Truth,” the first periodical of the Mennonite Church, as well as Sunday School curriculum. Additionally, he traveled and spoke widely in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Moody Bible Institute had Mennonite students as early as 1895, showing a direct engagement with the wider Christian community.<sup>78</sup>

Doctrines promoted by Moody Bible Institute, such as dispensationalism (the idea that God relates to people in distinctly different ways during different periods of human history) and premillennialism (the idea that Christ will return for his followers prior to most of the end time events described in the book of Revelation) were gaining influence in the General Conference Mennonite Church as well. Indeed, premillennial ideas found fertile soil among many Dutch/Low German/Russian Mennonites. (In fact, one group of these recent immigrants had traveled to central Asia, on the advice of a premillennialist leader, in an ill-fated attempt to await the return of the Lord, prior to their arrival in America.) As a result of this increase in higher

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<sup>77</sup> Gaustad and Schmidt, *The Religious History*, 222-225.

<sup>78</sup> Harold S. Bender, “John Fretz Funk” in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* Vol. 2 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1956), 421-423; Harold S. Bender, “Mennonite Publishing Company” in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* Vol. 3 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1957), 634-635; Harold S. Bender, “Herald of Truth” in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* Vol. 2 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1956), 707; Harold S. Bender, “Dwight Lyman Moody” in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* Vol. 3 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1957), 747.

education and interaction with the wider Christian world, the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church were in position to engage with modernist/fundamentalist divide as it developed.<sup>79</sup>

In 1893 Charles A. Briggs, a professor at New York's Union Theological Seminary was put on trial by the Presbyterian Church for teaching that there may have been errors in the original texts of the Bible. Despite his assertions that the errors he claimed to have found necessitated no change in doctrine, and that he was not challenging the infallibility of scripture as a rule for faith and practice, Briggs was found guilty by a church court, and dismissed from the New York Presbytery (the local governing body.) Interestingly, he was allowed to remain in his position as a seminary professor and continued to teach for almost two more decades. This story is instructive for at least two reasons. Firstly, it prefigures the clash between modern interpretations of scripture as opposed to more traditional interpretations. This was one part of the growing divide in America between urban and rural areas, between modernists and traditionalists, and was a rift that grew ever more pronounced as the First World War and the roaring twenties approached. Secondly, it shows the growing divide between seminarians and lay congregants, and ultimately foreshadows schisms in several denominations in the coming decades. Because of the increased interaction with other Christian bodies, the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church saw some of these same debates play out in their midst at the same time mainstream denominations were wrestling with these issues.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Rodney James Sawatsky, *History and Ideology: American Mennonite Identity – Definition Through History* (Kitchner Ontario: Pandora Press, 2005), 52-54; For a comprehensive treatment of this premillennialist Mennonite journey to Asia, see Fred Richard Belk, *The Great Trek of the Russian Mennonites to Central Asia, 1880-1884* (Newton, KS: Herald Press, 1976.)

<sup>80</sup> Gaustad and Schmidt, *The Religious History*, 291-294.

The label “fundamentalist” was applied to the more conservative wings of the church, and it was taken from the actions of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in 1910, and a series of books published between 1910 and 1920 as individual volumes with the overall title *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, which sold millions of copies. When the Presbyterian General Assembly met in 1910, they emphasized what they considered to be nonnegotiable doctrines. These included 1) the virgin birth of Christ, 2) the vicarious atonement – meaning that Christ’s death paid the penalty for sin, 3) the bodily resurrection of Christ – meaning he rose from the dead following his crucifixion, 4) the reality of the miracles recorded in the Bible, and 5) the inerrancy of scripture – meaning the Bible contains no errors. These five doctrines came to be known as the “fundamentals” and were later fleshed out and expanded in *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* by the likes of A. C. Dixon, R. A. Torrey, William Moorehead, C. I. Scofield (creator of the famous Scofield Study Bible,) and a host of other well-known premillennialists. When published as a four-volume set in 1909, *The Fundamentals* ran to 924 pages. Matthew Avery Sutton, Distinguished Professor at Washington State University, asserts that the fundamentalism of the early twentieth century is a direct result of the premillennialism that became popular in the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>81</sup>

Daniel Kauffman, a Bishop in the Mennonite Church, was a leading voice in the denomination from the 1890s until his death in 1944. He was deeply influenced by the fundamentalist currents then active in American Christendom, and he was key in introducing fundamentalist thought to the Mennonite Church. His first theological work was *Manual of*

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<sup>81</sup> Gaustad and Schmidt, *The Religious History*, 292-293; Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2014), 79-113; Evans, *Histories*, 245-26; In 2003 the original work was republished. See R. A. Torrey and A. C. Dixon, ed., *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* (Ada, MI: Baker Books, 2003.)



*Bible Doctrine*, published in 1898, and it was followed by a long list of other works. Kauffman was the first to attempt a systematic theology for Mennonites. His most obviously fundamentalist works were *Bible Doctrine*, a volume he edited in 1914, and *Doctrines of the Bible* which he edited (and wrote most of) in 1928. *Doctrines of the Bible* is in many ways a revised version of the earlier *Bible Doctrine*. Per the 1928 introduction penned by Kauffman “In preparation for this volume we leaned heavily upon and copied copiously from our former work of a similar nature, ‘Bible Doctrine.’”<sup>82</sup>

These tightly reasoned, yet still lengthy tomes, (*Bible Doctrines* at 701 pages and *Doctrines of the Bible* at 639 page) are both thoroughly fundamentalist in nature, covering much of the same material as the five “fundamentals.” In fact, Kauffman cites R. A. Torrey in the Forward to the 1928 edition. Inerrancy of scripture was a major concern for Kauffman, with 18 pages devoted to that subject alone. The dispensationalism that Avery alludes to as a precursor to fundamentalism shows through clearly, as well. From the section dealing with the Bible comes the following: “Both Old and New *dispensations* are provided with a spokesman, a mediator, a prophet, a lawgiver, one authorized by Almighty God to speak for his own *dispensation* – Moses under the Old, Jesus Christ under the new” (the emphasis here is mine.) Clearly, Kauffman and the authors of *The Fundamentals* are on the same page, figuratively speaking. Indeed, when you consider the time frame of Kauffman’s first iteration of *Bible Doctrines* they are almost

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<sup>82</sup> Paul Erb, “Kauffman, Daniel” in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* Vol. 3 (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1957), 156-157; Daniel Kauffman, *Manual of Bible Doctrines: Setting Forth the General Principles of the Plan of Salvation, Explaining the Symbolic Meaning and Practical Use of the Ordinances Instituted by Christ and His Apostles, and Pointing Out Specifically Some of the Restrictions Which the New Testament Scriptures Enjoin Upon Believers* (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing Company, 1898); Daniel Kauffman, ed., *Bible Doctrine: A Treatise on the Great Doctrines of the Bible, Pertaining to God, Angels, Satan, the Church, and the Salvation, Duties, and Destiny of Man* (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1914); Daniel Kauffman, ed., *Doctrines of the Bible: A Brief Discussion of the Teachings of God’s Word* (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1928). The addition I used for this project was republished by Herald Press in Scottdale, PA in 1993.

concurrent with *The Fundamentals*. In this instance, the Mennonite Church is wrestling with issues faced by mainstream American churches in real time.<sup>83</sup>

The General Conference Mennonite Church was dealing with the debate between fundamentalism and modernism as well. In 1916, a protracted controversy erupted at Bethel College. A Bible instructor, Jacob Balzer, told the assembled student body in a chapel service that the Old Testament book of Daniel may not have been written until well after the Babylonian Captivity – decidedly not the traditional interpretation, and some faculty members, including Gustav Enss were not happy, taking the issue to the president of the school. The president sided with the Balzar, but the contention refused die down. Eventually Enss was dismissed for refusing to let the issue drop, but then Balzar took a leave of absence and never returned. This was just the beginning of such conflicts. A few years later, faculty members were requested by the board governing the school to sign statements testifying to their orthodoxy, prompting then President J. W. Kliewer, who had supported Balzar in the school’s first major modernist controversy, to resign in protest.<sup>84</sup>

Daniel Kauffman not only promoted fundamentalist doctrines within his denomination, but he also helped to oversee the consolidation of the power of bishops over the group. With this more centralized, episcopal form of government, it was easier to force most of the congregations in the Mennonite Church into the more theologically conservative camp espoused by fundamentalists. While fundamentalism certainly made inroads into the General Conference, it is more difficult to categorize that group as a whole, as either fundamentalist or modernist. The

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<sup>83</sup> Erb, “Daniel Kauffman,” 157; Kauffman, *Bible Doctrine*; Kauffman, *Doctrines of the Bible*, 8, 136-153, 150; Kniss, *Disquiet*, 40-62.

<sup>84</sup> Haury, *Prairie People*, 232-234.

primary reason for this is the congregational form of government favored by the General Conference denomination. Despite a denominational structure and the presence of regional conferences, General Conference churches continued to maintain a great deal of autonomy. Because each congregation basically governed their own affairs, a wide variety of views could be held on any number of issues, and it was difficult for any particular faction, at least in the early years of the twentieth century, to gain control of the denomination. Even so, fundamentalism, at least at the congregational level would grow following the First World War. Perhaps this was due to an effort to be seen as more American. This more localized form of government would prove to make the response to the First World War more problematic for the pacifistic Mennonites in the General Conference group.<sup>85</sup>

## **World War I**

If the modernist/fundamentalist controversies were drawing the Mennonites into the mainstream of American Christianity, the outbreak of the First World War would have quite the opposite effect, particularly for General Conference churches in the west. Mennonites in the western United States faced a great deal more persecution during the First World War than did Mennonites in the eastern part of the country. The more recently arrived Dutch/Low German Mennonites from Russia overwhelmingly affiliated with the General Conference Mennonite Church as opposed to the Mennonite Church. Because of the geographic distribution already mentioned, this meant that the General Conference Mennonites had a more difficult time during the war when compared with members of the Mennonite Church. There are a number of reasons for this difference. One had to do with the relative “foreignness” of each group. The Swiss/High

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<sup>85</sup> Sawatsky, *History and Ideology*, 48-51.

German Mennonites in the east had been on American soil for well over two centuries and were in many ways a known commodity. Questions of language were closely related to this perception. Mennonites in the west had been much slower to adopt English than had their eastern counterparts, adding to their image as somewhat less American.<sup>86</sup>

The local perception that western Mennonites were somehow different colored the way that their surrounding communities interacted with them. Although relations between western Mennonites and their American neighbors had been largely positive prior to the outbreak of war, that changed.<sup>87</sup> Martha Voth Dyke, a member of a General Conference Mennonite congregation on the southern plains, clearly remembered how relations with English speaking neighbors soured in the face of war. Speaking of former associates, she said they were suddenly “scared to be friendly to us because we spoke German and there was high feeling against the German.”<sup>88</sup> It would seem that even among those with no personal animosity against local Mennonites, fear of social censure, or worse, was enough to convince them to turn away from former friends.

This fear was fed by the United States government. George Creel, and his Committee on Public Information, whipped up a level of patriotism in the late 1910s seldom seen in the United States. Unfortunately, this push to defeat the “Hun” spawned rabid anti-German hysteria. Oklahoma serves as an example of the worst byproducts of this sentiment. The state legislature did not meet even once while the United States was engaged in the war, leaving County Councils

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<sup>86</sup> Scott, *Introduction to Old Order Groups*, 20-24.

<sup>87</sup> Sharon Hartin Iorio, *Faith's Harvest: Mennonite Identity in Northwestern Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 79; Cornelius Krahn, *From the Steppes to the Prairies, 1874-1948* (North Newton, KS: Mennonite Publication Office, 1949), 12; Smith, *Smith's Story*, 530; Horn, “Acculturation” 14.

<sup>88</sup> Martha Voth Dyck, interviewed by David Haury and David Kaufman, North Newton, KS, October 17, 1972, Schowalter Oral History Collection, Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, KS, transcript in Mary Sprunger, ed., *Sourcebook: Oral History Interviews with World War One Conscientious Objectors* (Mennonite Central Committee, 1986), 81.

of Defense as the de facto governing agencies for the state. These councils were made up of local citizens, and they operated outside established law on a vigilante basis, with the open approval of many leading citizens. One Oklahoma Mennonite compared the tactics used by such councils to the activities of the Ku Klux Klan. In twenty-five Oklahoma counties, any public use of the German language was banned. German sounding town names and spellings were changed. “Kiel” became “Loyal,” and “Korn” became “Corn.” Switchboard operators were instructed not to allow German to be spoken over the telephone, and a number of German language newspapers closed down, never to reopen. One General Conference Mennonite congregation in Fairview, Oklahoma, found a sign posted on the door of their church building reading: “GOD ALMIGHTY UNDERSTANDS THE AMERICAN LANGUAGE. Address HIM only in that Tongue. DO NOT REMOVE THIS CARD.”<sup>89</sup>

Language was not the only factor prompting Americans in the west to turn against the relatively recently arrived Mennonites in their midst. As has been related, a key doctrine among Mennonites is nonresistance – they generally refused to fight in war. This refusal to fight, coupled with retention of the German language, proved to be more than many Americans in the west could deal with, sometimes with deadly results. While parts of the Midwest had

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<sup>89</sup> Horn, “Acculturation,” 15, 17-18; Evelyn Workman, interviewed by the author, Edmond, OK, March 14, 2011; James W. Fowler, “Tar and Feather Patriotism: The Suppression of Dissent in Oklahoma during World War One,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 56 no. 4 (Winter 1978-79), 410; Kent Ruth, *Oklahoma Travel Handbook* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 78; Marvin E. Kroeker, “‘In Death You Shall Not Wear It Either’: The Persecution of Mennonite Pacifists in Oklahoma,” in *An Oklahoma I Had Never Seen Before: Alternative Views on Oklahoma History*, ed. Davis D. Joyce (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 81-82; Robert R. Coon, “Being a Peace Church Makes a Difference,” in *Growing Faith: General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma*, ed. Wilma McKee (Newton: KS: Faith and Life Press, 1988), 148-149; Richard C. Rohrs, *The Germans in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 45-46.

traditionally displayed a tendency toward isolationism, and had evidenced some sympathy for pacifism, that changed quickly with the American declaration of war.<sup>90</sup>

This turning against Germans in general, and pacifists in particular, was not strictly a populist affair. Indeed, many of the leading voices in America headed Creel's call and came to support not only the war effort, but the rationale behind it. Intellectuals not only came out in support of the war, but also approved of the almost blind patriotism of the masses. John Dewey claimed that pacifism "emphasizes the emotion rather than intelligence, ideals rather than specific purposes, the nature of personal motives rather than the creation of social agencies and environments." Those opposed to military service were at best empty-headed dreamers, and at worst self-serving, antisocial miscreants. They were clearly not fit to take part in the American mission to "make the world safe for democracy." Former President Teddy Roosevelt, who interestingly had previously held a following among some Mennonites in the west, despite his military background, came out strongly against pacifism even before America entered the war. In a July 22, 1915 New York *Times* article, he said: "A mother who is not willing to raise her boy to be a soldier, is not fit for citizenship."<sup>91</sup>

While western Mennonites were well-aware of the propaganda being used against them, they were often unsure how to respond to it. When they did, it was ineffective at best, and

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<sup>90</sup> Horn, "Acculturation", 19; James C. Juhnke, *A People of Two Kingdoms: The Acculturation of Kansas Mennonites* (Newton: KS Faith and Life Press, 1975), 96; William Frank Zornow, *Kansas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), 229.

<sup>91</sup> Horn, "Acculturation", 16; Rodrick Nash, *The Nervous Generation: American Thought, 1917-1930* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1970), 34-35; Albert C. Voth, interviewed by James C. Juhnke, Topeka, KS, February 1, 1969, Schowalter Oral History Collection, Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, KS, transcript in Mary Sprunger, ed., *Sourcebook: Oral History Interviews with World War One Conscientious Objectors* (Mennonite Central Committee, 1986), 54-55; Ray H. Abrahms, *Preachers Present Arms: The Role of the American Churches and Clergy in World Wars I and II, with Some Observations on the War in Vietnam* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969), 60.

damaging at worst. Western Mennonites frequently found it difficult to articulate the religious basis for their pacifist beliefs. One Mennonite who was drafted attempted to use a Bible verse explaining his opposition to bearing arms. He was attempting to quote Matthew 22:21, which reads “Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.” Unfortunately, instead of saying “Caesar,” he said “Kaiser.”<sup>92</sup> This one simple encounter provides a clear window into the nature of the relationship between General Conference Mennonites in the west and their surrounding communities.

This verbal exchange shows not only the difficulty of the language barrier for these Mennonites, but also the lack of trust and understanding on the part of their American neighbors. Many of these Mennonite families had been on American soil thirty years or less. Additionally, the area they settled was “new” by European American standards. The non-native Americans, even if they had been in the country for many generations, were also new to the area. Not only had the Dutch/Low German/Russian Mennonites not had time to acculturate, but no one in the region had had generations to bond with their neighbors like communities in the eastern part of the country. Two hundred plus years, and multiple previous wars had given Mennonites in the east, where the Mennonite Church was strong, time to acculturate – at least enough to clearly communicate with their neighbors. It had also provided them time to establish a history with their neighbors where they could be viewed as good citizens, if a bit unusual. While Americans

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<sup>92</sup> Haury, *Prairie People*, 203; Kroeker, “In Death,” 87; James C. Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity in America, 1890-1930* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 232. Cornelius Voth, interviewed by James C. Juhnke, Goessel, KS, June 6, 1969, Schowalter Oral History Collection, Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, KS, transcript in Mary Sprunger, ed., *Sourcebook: Oral History Interviews with World War One Conscientious Objectors* (Mennonite Central Committee), 1986, 5.

in the east were not always thrilled with their Mennonite neighbors, their pacifism did not smack of disloyalty in quite the same fashion as the actions of Mennonites in the west.

The denominational response, particularly in the General Conference Mennonite Church, was confused. As has been noted, the General Conference Mennonite Church was much more congregational in nature, which meant individual congregations had much more freedom in doctrine and practice. While the General Conference was willing to make general statements of policy, how those were to be implemented (if at all) was largely left to the individual congregations. The General Conference did form what was called an exemption committee, the purpose of which was to negotiate with the federal government to exempt Mennonites from military service. But true to form, they were reluctant to give specific instructions to members who had been drafted. This reluctance to provide explicit instructions trickled down even to the local congregations, putting drafted General Conference Mennonites in an unenviable position. Some congregational leaders encouraged drafted members to perform noncombatant service for the military. But in this, the individualism of the General Conference shows through. Many individual members found this advice to be an unacceptable compromise. It was a similar compromise on service to the government that led many of these Dutch/Low German Mennonites to flee Russia less than half a century before.<sup>93</sup>

If the lines of communication between the denomination, congregations, and individual members within the General Conference were clouded, communications with the federal government were no better. The government agreed to allow members of the historic peace

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<sup>93</sup> Horn, "Acculturation", 19-20; Harold S. Bender, "Bishop" in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1, (Newton, KS: Mennonite Publishing Office, 1955), 347-349; Juhnke, *Vision*, 212; Haury, *Prairie People*, 198-203; Albert B. Voth interview, Sprunger, *Sourcebook*, 57, 61; Martha Voth Dyck interview, Sprunger, *Sourcebook*, 82-83.



churches to perform noncombatant service if drafted, but it was at the president's discretion to define what qualified as appropriate service. President Wilson waited almost a year before giving a definitive definition. Even for those willing to engage in noncombat service, which not all were, there was no way of knowing what that might entail. Once finally defined, it consisted of placement in the Medical Corps, the Quartermasters Corps, and the Engineering Corps. Between 2,000 and 2,500 Mennonites were drafted during the First World War. The majority refused to perform any service under the military, while a sizable minority agreed to the long elusive noncombatant positions. A very small minority accepted standard military placement.<sup>94</sup>

Secretary of War Newton Baker added to the problem. During the six months between the time that the first Mennonites were drafted, and when President Wilson defined what would constitute noncombatant service, Baker acted deceptively, encouraging Mennonites who had been drafted to report to camp, with reassurances that their beliefs would be respected, while, at the same time instructing military leaders to vigorously attempt to convince conscientious objectors to accept regular military service. His deception was not limited to his dealings with the peace churches. Several sources indicate that Baker was not forthright in his dealings with federal government either.<sup>95</sup> Confusion reigned across the board.

For those Mennonites who showed up at camp, particularly in the west, difficult times lay ahead. In addition to attempts to erode their pacifist convictions, many faced mental and physical torture. Individual Mennonites were threatened with execution, misled about policies,

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<sup>94</sup> Horn, "Acculturation", 20-22; U.S. Congress, *Public Law No.12*, 65<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess.; M. Kroeker, "In Death," 85; Smith, *Smith's Story*, 543-544; Haury, *Prairie People*, 202.

<sup>95</sup> Horn, "Acculturation", 21; Kroeker, *In Death*, 85; Albert N. Keim and Grant M. Stoltzfus, *The Politics of Conscience: The Historic Peace Churches and America at War, 1917-1955* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988, 46-50; Frederick C. Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty: German Americans and World War I* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974), 257-259; Haury, *Prairie People*, 201-202; Juhnke, *Vision*, 230-241; Juhnke, *A People*, 100.

put in solitary confinement, and put on bread and water rations for long stretches. Some were confined with patients suffering from venereal disease. The purpose behind this tactic was to convince the Mennonites that they would also become ill. Because of the sheltered nature of the communities they came from, most did not understand the exact nature of venereal diseases and how they were spread. Other Mennonite draftees were scrubbed with brooms and lye soap until their skin began to peel off. There were more subtle forms of abuse, as well. At Camp Travis, Texas, commanders assigned Mennonites to do kitchen duty on Sunday, even when it was not their turn, in an effort to prevent them from holding religious services. When they objected, they were relieved of Sunday kitchen duty, while also not being allowed to eat on Sundays. The fact that so few buckled under the pressure to bear arms is a testament to the strength of their convictions.<sup>96</sup>

Perhaps one of the strangest episodes to come out of this period revolved around the acceptability of wearing a military uniform while in camp. A few drafted Mennonites refused to wear a military uniform while in camp, though the majority did so without issue. One individual who would not wear the uniform was John Klaassen, the son of a leader in a General Conference Mennonite congregation in Washita County, Oklahoma. After being drafted, he was passed through his physical examination, despite having such poor eyesight that he should have failed the exam. His claim of conscientious objector status, coupled with the fact that his father ran a German speaking school on their property, and tended to be outspoken, did not incline the draft board to be unbiased about his potential fitness for military service. This local draft board

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<sup>96</sup> Horn, "Acculturation", 22-23; Juhnke, *Vision*, 232-235; Luebke, 258; Cornelius Voth interview, Sprunger, *Sourcebook*, 9-19; Henry J. Becker, interviewed by Don Holsinger, Ringwood, Oklahoma, November 28, 1919, Schowalter Oral History Collection, Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, KS, transcript in Mary Sprunger, *Sourcebook: Oral History Interviews with World War I Conscientious Objectors* (Mennonite Central Committee, 1986), 33-34.

passing a conscientious objector through his physical exam despite obvious health issues was not an isolated event. Klaassen was sent to Camp Travis, Texas, for training. After refusing to wear the uniform issued to him, he was court-martialed, convicted, sentenced to life in prison, and sent to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to serve out his sentence. Shortly after arriving, he contracted influenza and died. For good measure, before his body was sent home for burial, he was dressed in a military uniform, and his casket was covered in an American flag. This last act by the military was more than his father could bear, and he removed the flag and dressed his son in civilian clothing for the funeral, saying he would not wear the uniform in life, and he would not wear it in death. Removal of the uniform and flag was not well received by the surrounding community. In response to threats from members of the local County Council of Defense, Klaassen and his immediate family, fearing for their safety, fled to Canada shortly after the funeral. Within a short period of time almost half of his congregation joined him north of the border. Klaassen's niece later said that some of the tension between the local community and the Mennonite congregation could have been avoided had Klaassen acted in a more discreet manner. Other Mennonites concurred that it is possible that they could have done a better job of communicating their stance to the outside community.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Horn, "Acculturation", 18, 23-25; Esther Klaassen Bergen, interviewed by Fred Zerger, Morden, Manitoba, January 2, 1971, Schowalter Oral History Collection, Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, KS, transcript in Mary Sprunger, ed., *Sourcebook: Oral History Interviews with World War I Conscientious Objectors* (Mennonite Central Committee, 1986, 87); Helena Klaassen Dalke, interviewed by Fred Zerger, Morden, Manitoba, January 2, 1971, Schowalter Oral History Collection, Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, KS, transcription in Mary Sprunger, ed., *Sourcebook: Oral History Interviews with World War I Conscientious Objectors* (Mennonite Central Committee, 1986, 97); Becker interview, Sprunger, *Sourcebook*, 31; M. Kroeker, "In Death," 84-86; John Arn, *The Herold Mennonite Church, 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, 1899-1969* (North Newton, KS: Mennonite Press, 1969, 13-17; Wilma McKee, "Herold: A Caring Country Church," in *Growing Faith: General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma*, ed., Wilma McKee (North Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1988), 62; Robert R. Coon, "Being a Peace Church Makes a Difference," in *Growing Faith: General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma*, ed., Wilma McKee, (North Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1988), 151-152; Douglas Hale, *The Germans from Russia in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 26-27; Esthern Bergan interview, Sprunger, *Sourcebook*, 86-90; Helena Dalke interview, Sprunger, *Sourcebook*, 98; Dean Kroeker, "Eden: Tried By Fire," in

The issue with the uniform, while perhaps most dramatically displayed with John Klaassen, was also not an isolated event, and shows the level of blind animosity toward conscientious objectors during the First World War. Klaassen was one of 41 conscientious objectors at Camp Travis to be court-martialed for refusing to wear the uniform. This was a violation of the 64<sup>th</sup> Article of war. The strange thing is, the vast majority of those on trial apparently did wear the uniform. It is clear from looking at photographs of the 57<sup>th</sup> Company, 165<sup>th</sup> Depot Brigade, the unit these men served with, taken prior to the trial, that most of the men were indeed in uniform. The initial sentence was life in prison, as has been noted. Shortly thereafter, their sentences were commuted to twenty-five years at hard labor. Fortunately, they were released from custody following the end of the war. In the push to punish conscientious objectors, the truth of the charges seemed to matter little.<sup>98</sup>

While these prisoners were freed, and almost a quarter of century would pass before Mennonites again had to respond in some way to a draft, the effects of the war lingered for individual Mennonites, as well as the group as a whole. During the war between 600 and 800 Mennonites left the United States, going mostly to Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Almost all of these were of Dutch/Low German descent from the Great Plains. For those who remained, ways to repair relations with their local communities had to be found, and the Low Germans began to acculturate in ways that their Swiss/High German counterparts already had. The adoption of English for church services, a feat already accomplished before the war among eastern

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*Growing Faith: General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma*, ed., Wilma McKee (North Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1988), 77-78.

<sup>98</sup> Horn, 24; Arn, *Herold*, 16; *Proceedings of a General Court-Martial*, convened at Camp Travis Texas, June 7, 1918. Showalter Oral History Collection, Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, KS, (Henry J. Becker file) in Mary Sprunger, *Sourcebook: Oral History Interviews with World War I Conscientious Objectors* (Mennonite Central Committee, 1986, 69; Henry Becker interview, Sprunger, *Sourcebook*, 33; Albert C. Voth interview, Sprunger, *Sourcebook*, 61-62; Juhnke, *Vision*, 236; Juhnke, *A People*, 103.

Mennonites had only haltingly begun in much of the west. That began to change after the war, when the switch from High German to English for religious purposes began in earnest. It was a slow painful process, at times even reversing course, but there was a new sense of urgency that had not been felt before. The switch from Low German to English in conversation, particularly in the home, came later. As this was less public than a church service, some perhaps felt this was a safer expression of their culture. By the 1930s, most Mennonites, at least in Kansas, had transitioned to English for their everyday interactions, even among themselves. In more isolated areas, such as Oklahoma, this transition was a bit slower. While almost all Mennonites were conversant in English, Low German lingered in individual homes well into the 1950s.<sup>99</sup>

Beyond issues of acculturation, and far more quickly than language transition in the west, Mennonites began to look for ways to demonstrate loyalty and good citizenship as a means of repairing their reputation with local communities. Following the end of the First World War, there was a surge of benevolence activities among Mennonites. Low Germans from the western states were central to these activities. It is not a coincidence that they had been viewed with more suspicion than Mennonites in the east. In one Kansas community, in a period beginning during the war, and ending shortly after, Mennonites raised nearly \$40,000 for relief work. And it was truly a group effort, with only two individuals contributing more than \$200. While the cynical attributed this to a desire to help Mennonites still in Russia, it is worth noting that only one-fifth of that total was earmarked for Mennonite recipients. These people were attempting to

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<sup>99</sup> Horn, "Acculturation", 25-26; Coon, "Peace Church," 152-153; M. Kroeker, "In Death," 88-89; McKee, "Harold," 63; Wilma McKee, "Hydro: Forming a Church Family" in *Growing Faith: General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma*, ed. Wilma McKee (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1988), 67; Wilma McKee, "Greenfield: Struggle Blended with Faith," in *Growing Faith: General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma*, ed. Wilma McKee (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1988), 74; Wilma McKee, "Working Together in the Oklahoma Convention," in *Growing Faith: General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma*, ed. Wilma McKee (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1988), 174; Arn, *Herold*, 19; Smith, *Smith's Story*, 513; Juhnke, *Two Kingdoms*, 117; Arlie Johnson, interviewed by the author, April 28, 2010; Workman, interview.

demonstrate that there were methods other than military service to be good citizens. On a larger scale, by utilizing techniques common to other institutions, Mennonites raised an estimated \$3,000,000 for benevolence purposes. Most of these funds were raised through a new cooperative relief endeavor called the Mennonite Central Committee. It was founded in 1920 by four Mennonite denominations, including the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church. Since that time, a number of other groups with varying degrees of connection to Mennonites have joined the organization. The purpose of the group was initially conceived of as a way to provide relief services to people in need. In the coming years, the scope of the organization broadened.<sup>100</sup>

By the 1920s, both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church found themselves much altered. The General Conference Mennonite Church was continuing to grow, and after a difficult period in the mid to late nineteenth century, the Mennonite Church was again flourishing. In some ways, they were much more like their surrounding neighbors – they had adopted many of the same religious innovations used by other American Christians. Theologically, fundamentalism had made great inroads in both groups. This acceptance of fundamentalism, at least in some quarters, is highly significant as will be demonstrated later in the study. Fundamentalism among Mennonites opened the way for growing division, eventually leading to a three-way breach that would allow for two separate fundamentalist inspired schools of thought. As will be shown, this had different impacts on the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonites Church, but would be key in

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<sup>100</sup> Horn, “Acculturation”, 25-27; Wesley Prieb, *Peter C. Hiebert*, (Hillsboro, KS: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1990), 52-73; Juhnke, *Two Kingdoms*, 113-116; Juhnke, *Vision*, 254-257; Levi Mumaw, Facts and Figures of the Secretary Treasurer, “ in *Feeding the Hungry*, ed. Peter C. Hiebert and Orie O. Miller (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 1929), 323-330; Harold S. Bender, “Mennonite Central Committee” ” in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* Vol. 3 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1957), 605-609.

understanding how they came together, as well as why the merger was plagued with division from its inception. Also significant was the trauma of the First World War, and it resulted in the beginning of a slow but sure shift in how American Mennonites understood pacifism, as will be traced in succeeding chapters.

Despite the adversities of the First World War, or perhaps in part because of them, this was a time of growth for Mennonites. The worst of the nineteenth century schisms were behind the Mennonite Church, and under strengthened leadership those that remained in the fold became more unified. In both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church, we see a growing sense of unity, purpose, and cross denominational cooperation, as evidenced in the creation of the Mennonite Central Committee. As the Second World War approached, Mennonites had both internal and external issues to confront. Regarding the wider American community, a better, more proactive approach to the draft would be needed, especially from the General Conference Mennonites, so as to avoid a repeat of the chaos of the First World War, but the immediate post war cooperation of Mennonites hinted at the strong possibility that such an endeavor might prove successful.

At the same time, the Mennonite Church would begin to confront the doctrinaire and authoritarian style of their leadership, looking for an alternative to the fundamentalist-infused systematic theology developed by Daniel Kauffman. His leadership had stabilized and strengthened the group, but some began to desire a different theological approach. The Mennonite Church and the General Conference would begin to follow what outwardly appeared to be more similar trajectories, though their polity – the way they governed themselves – remained distinct. Unification was still far in the future, but there were currents moving slowly in

that direction. The following chapter will examine how the experiences of World War II differed from the First World War. Although there were marked improvements, much remained the same, especially on the home front. Chapter 3 will also examine the beginnings of a theological pushback against the fundamentalism that had gained so much ground among Mennonites.



### **Chapter 3 – Mennonites in the Mid Twentieth Century**

The middle years of the twentieth century saw additional profound shifts within both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church. Trends that had begun previously continued. There were dramatic changes in terms of engagement with the outside world, as well as theologically. The changing theological outlook, or more properly, diverging outlooks, affected practice, and laid the groundwork for divisions in both denominations, but most especially in the Mennonite Church. The growing distance between the fundamentalist outlook, and the new direction – what came to be known the “Anabaptist Vision,” would help pave the way for denominational restructuring that would, by the turn of the century, result in the creation of the Mennonite Church USA. In terms of engagement, members of both denominations began to more proactively engage with the federal government as well as increasingly cooperate with religious groups outside their own denominations. The results of this show most clearly in the changing treatment of conscientious objectors, at least as it applied to the federal government. While hardly producing a spotless record for the federal government, it was lightyears ahead of the treatment they had afforded those with religious objections to fighting in the previous war. This engagement engendered in the experiences of conscientious objectors also, inadvertently, laid the groundwork for further acculturation, and ever-increasing engagement by Mennonites with those outside their tradition. The men who returned from Civilian Public Service camps, the government’s preferred place for conscientious objectors, would come back to their communities changed people. The situation at the local and state level, at least in areas populated by the predominantly Low German General Conference group, was more in line with the World War I era, than with the new federal approach. There were changes on the home front as well, and they were at least in part a response to the continuing friction with

the general public, particularly in the west. The end result of the experiences of the drafted, as well as those left behind, was further acculturation and broader outlook, both necessary components to the eventual merger of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church. In this chapter I make extensive use of memoirs, press clippings, documents, and official records related to the Civilian Public Service project to examine the experiences of Conscientious Objectors and those they came in contact with, in a wide variety of circumstances. I also make use of the work of Mennonite scholars of the period, including Paul Toews, Rachel Waltner Goossen, and Perry Bush.

### **Increased Political Engagement**

As another world war developed, Mennonites began to actively engage with the federal government. Despite legal protections for conscientious objectors during the First World War, Mennonites had fared poorly. Their leaders recognized that statute alone might not provide the protection that it promised. In conjunction with other peace churches, Mennonite leaders sought a meeting with President Roosevelt in 1940 to clarify what roles those whose religious beliefs would not allow them to serve in the military might play in the event of the increasing likelihood that the United States became involved in the war in Europe. Peter C. Hiebert, a Low German minister from Kansas (and a member of the Mennonite Brethren Church) served as the leader of the multid denominational peace church delegation. The group met not only with Roosevelt, but also with Secretary of War Harry H. Woodring. The results of this proactive policy were beneficial for the Mennonites, as Roosevelt responded to them in a very favorable manner. Unlike their response to military service in the First World War, which was haphazard at best,

and more like an afterthought at worst, the World War II response was a cooperative, proactive move that created better outcomes for all. <sup>101</sup>

The increased political engagement was foreshadowed, at least among General Conference Mennonites on the Great Plains, by increased political engagement at the level of voting and participation in federal programs in the 1930s. The horrors of the Great Depression, worsened in this region by environmental disaster, impacted Mennonites in much the same way it did all Americans, though Paul Toews has convincingly demonstrated that in at least some localities on the Great Plains, Mennonites seemed to fare somewhat better than many of their neighbors, particularly in the early days of the Great Depression. Mennonites were generally viewed as conservative, when they became involved in politics at all. Dutch/Low German/Russian Mennonites, as has already been established, were much more likely to engage politically than were their Swiss/High German counterparts. The crisis of the 1930s began to bring at least temporary changes to this political landscape. The New Deal policies of Franklin Roosevelt found ready acceptance among Mennonites, and in many locations, they voted for Roosevelt in almost equal percentages when compared to their neighbors. Support for the New Deal continued through the 1936 election, with Mennonites not wavering in their support of FDR until 1940, when a significant bloc of Mennonites broke from the Democratic camp. The federal policies put in place by the New Deal changed the lives and lifestyles of Mennonites. Crop insurance and farm credit services changed the way farmers conducted their operations, and Mennonites were no exception. Additionally, the Rural Electrification Administration, and the technological changes it made possible opened the way for increased American acculturation in

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<sup>101</sup> Horn, "Acculturation", 29-30; M. Kroeger, "In Death," 89; Prieb, *Peter C. Hiebert*, 93-96; Smith, *Smith's Story*, 553; Haury, *Prairie People*, 199-202; Juhnke, *Vision*, 212-218.

Mennonite homes. Their rural locations would no longer serve as well as they once had as a shield from larger cultural trends.<sup>102</sup>

President Roosevelt's New Deal, while it may have broken the fall of the national economy and brought some needed stability, could not bring a fuller economic recovery. Millions of Americans were still forced to search the country for work, and Mennonites were important participants in this demographic trend. Sharon Hartin Iorio asserts that Mennonites were represented in the exodus to California (the Central Valley was the most common destination for Mennonites) in almost equal proportions to the population at large. In the states hardest hit by the Dust Bowl, such as Oklahoma, many Mennonite congregations dissolved as members drifted away in search of a better livelihood.<sup>103</sup> Such changes had not only a lasting economic impact, but also a cultural one.

### **Changing Approach to Conscientious Objectors**

If Mennonite acculturation patterns, as well as their relationship to technological change, moved them closer in experience and ideas to other Americans, we can also see on the part of certain governmental institutions a greater degree of acceptance of behavior by Mennonites which differed markedly from that of most other Americans. We can see this most clearly in the way in which the American Selective Service system treated Mennonites in World War II. Draft boards often refused to honor requests for conscientious objector status, but unlike the First World War, the federal government stepped in with special review boards to hear appeals,

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<sup>102</sup> Paul Toews, *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970: Modernity and the persistence of Religious Community*, (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1996), 46-50; Horn, "Acculturation", 28; Iorio, *Faith's Harvest*, 176-177; Juhnke, *Two Kingdoms*, 124.

<sup>103</sup> Horn, "Acculturation", 28; Loewen, *Diaspora in the Countryside*, 27; Iorio, *Faith's Harvest*, 177-179, Robert R. Coon, "Once Our Partners in the Gospel" in *Growing Faith: General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma*, ed., Wilma McKee, (North Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1988), 93, 98, 106, 108.

resulting in almost all the denials for CO status being overturned. The level of animosity toward Mennonites is also shown in the farm deferment program. The federal government had directed the Selective Service, who oversaw the draft, to provide liberal farm deferments, as sourcing food for the war was a major concern. Mennonites were still overwhelmingly farmers during this period, and they would have been ideal candidates. However, in the west, particularly in Oklahoma, Mennonites were disproportionately denied such deferments.<sup>104</sup> The ill will from the previous war had obviously not gone away. This poor treatment also serves as a further example of how the more recent immigration status of the Dutch/Low German/Russian Mennonites created problems for them that their Swiss/High German counterparts did not experience.

The early engagement by the Mennonites and other peace churches with the federal government paid off richly. In 1940, what was informally known as the Burke-Wadsworth bill passed Congress and was signed into law as the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, which clearly specified that alternative service could be carried out under *civilian* direction.

Section 5 (g) of the act states:

Nothing contained in this act shall be construed to require any person to be subject to combatant training and service in the land and naval forces of the United States who, by reason of religious training and belief, is conscientiously opposed to war in any form. Any such person claiming such exemption from combatant training and service because of such conscientious objections whose claim is sustained by the local board shall, if he is inducted into the land or naval forces under this act, be assigned to noncombatant service as defined by the President, or shall, if he is found to be conscientiously opposed to participation in such noncombatant service, in lieu of such induction, be assigned to work of national importance under civilian direction.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Horn, "Acculturation", 30; George Q. Flynn, *The Draft, 1940-1973* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993), 65; Iorio, *Faith's Harvest*, 202-205; M. Kroeker, "In Death," 91.

<sup>105</sup> An Act to provide for the common defense by increasing the personnel of the armed forces of the United States and providing for its training. Public Law 783, 76<sup>th</sup> Congress, 3<sup>rd</sup> sess. (Sept. 16, 1940).

While getting conscientious objector status was initially difficult, which must have been frightening for those who remembered the First World War, once it was achieved, things looked radically different. This time, the policy as laid down by the government was clear and it was carried out exactly as described. The New Deal, which Mennonites had supported, provided them with a gift that could not have been anticipated when it began in the early 1930s – the Civilian Conservation Corps. This program, one of the longest running of the New Deal make-work agencies, provided a ready space to plug in conscientious objectors. The original program took young men out of the public work force and put them to work in the national forests, providing conservation while easing the competition for jobs back home. This old agency was renamed the Civilian Public Service program. In addition to the soil conservation and forestry projects of the old CCC, this new CPS added work including biological and medical research, as well as service in mental hospitals. This continuance of the agency was a win for the peace churches as they were providing needed services not only to the country, but to humankind in general, and they were not under military authority. The CPS was a win for the federal government as well. Not only were conscientious objectors providing valuable labor, but the peace churches were *financing* the CPS camps. While this seems egregious to the contemporary mind (hopefully), it was viewed as a major improvement to COs and their congregations. A total of 4,665 Mennonites served in the Civilian Public Service system between 1941 and 1947.<sup>106</sup>

The CPS camps had an unintended consequence that wrought lasting change among Mennonite participants and their churches. While the historic “peace churches” (Amish, Mennonite, Society of Friends, Church of the Brethren) were most closely associated with the

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<sup>106</sup> Horn, “Acculturation”, 30-31; Smith, *Smith’s Story*, 553-554; M. Kroeker, “In Death,” 90; Prieb, *Peter C. Hiebert*, 96-98; US Congress, Senate, *Hearing Before the Committee on Military Affairs United States Senate on S. 315 and S. 675*, 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1943, 13-20.

CPS camps in the mind of the public, they were not the only religious groups to send conscientious objectors to the program. At least 226 religious groups, as well as many men who did not claim affiliation with any denomination, were represented in the camps.<sup>107</sup>

A close reading of the records of the CPS available on the website *Living Peace In A Time Of War: The Civilian Public Service Story*, a collection of interviews, reports, and documents related to the program, and hosted by the Mennonite Central Committee, clearly shows the diversity Mennonites were exposed to upon entering the camps.<sup>108</sup> It is important to remember that of 11,935 people who served in the CPS, well under half were Mennonite. Indeed, in looking at the religious affiliations of the workers listed on the website, even the Mennonites themselves represented a diverse lot. At least nine different specific Mennonite groups are listed, plus many listed as simply Mennonite without signifying a particular denomination. Five different Amish denominational groups – an offshoot of the Mennonites – are listed, as well as several groups who grew out of the Church of the Brethren movement. There were also Hutterites, another group with Anabaptist roots. Additionally, at least two specific denominations that grew out of the Quaker movement are listed, as well as several listed simply as Friends, without any further specification as to denomination. These specific groups should not be surprising, as these are all historic peace churches. What may surprise some are the many other groups listed that are not typically regarded as a part of the pacifist tradition. There were Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, Evangelical Reformed, Jehovah's Witnesses, Congregationalists, various Holiness groups that had separated from the Methodist church, Pentecostals, and Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ – both products of the Restoration

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<sup>107</sup> Horn, "Acculturation", 31; Smith, *Smith's Story*, 554

<sup>108</sup> *Living Peace In A Time Of War: The Civilian Public Service Story*. Mennonite Central Committee. <http://www.civilianpublicservice.org/> (accessed January 17, 2020).

Movement of the nineteenth century. The list was not limited to Christians, either. There were several people listed from at least two separate groups that are part of the Jewish tradition, as well as Muslims and Buddhists. Some of the Conscientious Objectors who served in the camps based their pacifism on humanist principles, as opposed to overtly religious ones, as evidenced by several members who listed their religious preference as none.<sup>109</sup>

Close proximity, coupled with the long duration of service, introduced the mostly sheltered Mennonites to a host of other religious beliefs and traditions. The fact that people who held to different beliefs, yet still took a pacifist stance must surely have given these other groups a measure of legitimacy in the eyes of Mennonites who might have previously looked askance at other belief systems. It definitely served as a tool of acculturation. The men who entered these camps would come home changed.

### **Work in Civilian Public Service Camps**

Once in the Civilian Conservation Camps, a number of possible duties awaited the men. Some of the types of work previously done by the Civilian Conservation Corps continued, such as forestry work. Some Conscientious Objectors became part of a group known as the smoke jumpers. Their job was to parachute into forest fire situations to bring the fires under control. Typically, the men jumped in groups, and afterward, their fire-fighting equipment was dropped in. Depending on the length of time required to bring the blaze under control, a fire base camp might be set up to provide food and services to the jumpers. Because of the rough terrain in the west, the firefighters faced dangers beyond smoke and flame, including rough landings on jagged

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<sup>109</sup> Mennonite Central Committee. Living Peace In A Time Of War: The Civilian Public Service Story. Workers. <http://www.civilianpublicservice.org/workers/> (accessed January 17, 2020).



mountain sides, and the ever-present threat of rattlesnakes. The smoke jumpers remained busy in the warmer months, fighting approximately seventy-five fires in the summer of 1944 alone. The bravery of the men involved in this work was not lost on those they served under. For example, John Fallman, the United States Forrest Ranger at Riggins, Idaho, praised the group of smoke jumpers who put out the Berg Mountain fire in the Salmon River country in August of 1944 with these words in his official report of the incident: "An outstanding fact was that during all this time none of these fellows never complained about anything at all ... they deserve a lot of credit for their work and their ability to take it on the chin and still be cheerful about it all." Such work clearly defies the stereotype of Conscientious Objectors as being afraid to die.<sup>110</sup>

One of the new, and perhaps most interesting jobs performed by Conscientious Objectors was their work in mental health facilities. Mental health institutions at the time had a not entirely undeserved poor reputation. With little understanding of the nature of mental illness, and lacking the medicines now available, such institutions were more about warehousing the mentally ill, rather than providing meaningful treatment. The conditions were terrible, and it was often difficult to find employees. As a result, not only were such institutions frequently understaffed, but the quality of care, as well as the character of some of the workers left much to be desired. To those in control of the Public Service Camps, this seemed like an ideal place to send Conscientious Objectors.

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<sup>110</sup> Murray Braden, "Smoke Jumper," published December 1944. Subject File: CPS Material from/by Individual Camps. Box 6: Misc. Materials from #103 Missoula. Swarthmore College Peace Collection. Mennonite Central Committee. (accessed, January 17, 2020) <http://civilianpublicservice.org/documents/90>; As a side note on the previously mentioned interactions with those outside their tradition, of the men involved in this particular fight, only four of the twelve bore an ethnically Mennonite name.

This program was entitled “The Mental Hygiene Program of Civilian Service.” I will use the words of a pamphlet put out by the CPS to outline the official goals the program hoped to achieve:

- As volunteers under Selective Service to work in hospitals for the mentally ill and training schools for the mentally deficient, we wish to serve constructively.
- We seek to improve the quality of our own work.
- We seek to help the public institutions to fulfill more adequately their essential purpose in the structure of present day society.
- We seek to promote a deeper public understanding of institutional needs and problems.
- In an attempt to make a contribution which will be concrete and enduring, we have united our efforts in The Mental Hygiene Program of Civilian Public Service.

I would like to draw particular attention to the fourth stated purpose of this arm of the agency.

As I will show, the truthfulness of this goal will be called into question in the aftermath of comments made by Conscientious Objectors in general, and Mennonites in particular, regarding conditions in, and suggested improvements to, the institutions in question.<sup>111</sup>

Mennonites welcomed this form of Civilian Public Service as a means of ministering to humankind, and enthusiastically embraced the work at hand. For example, CPS worker Robert S. Kreider, a Mennonite who became the Director of Hospital Units under the program, wrote an article entitled “The Opportunity of the Church” promoting the work of The Mental Hygiene Program, and explaining it as a fulfillment of Christ’s command. After opening the article by quoting Matthew 4:23, which speaks of Jesus traveling through Galilee, healing the sick, he calls

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<sup>111</sup> Mental Hygiene Program pamphlet. Central Committee, Philadelphia, PA (no publisher, no date) Harold Barton Manuscript Collection (CDGA). Box 2: National Mental Health Foundation, n.d. Swarthmore College Peace Collection. Living Peace In A Time Of War: The Civilian Public Service Story. Mennonite Central Committee. (accessed, January 17, 2020) <http://civilianpublicservice.org/documents/146>

the church to action. The article is a mixture of call to action and chiding for having neglected this important work. Kreider points out that of the 450 hospitals run by Protestant churches in America, only three are devoted to the care of the mentally ill. He praises Civilian Public Service work as a wakeup call to Christians about the need for better care for the mentally ill. After describing what he believes have been lessons learned by the 900 Mennonites engaged in this work, and what their congregations can learn, he proposes opening psychiatric wards in hospitals already run by Mennonites as an alternative to the state institutions. Nevertheless, he allows that most mentally ill people will continue to be cared for under state run institutions and calls for Mennonites to consider work in those institutions. “Qualified C.P.S. men have been thinking of postwar service in mental hospitals. Some of these men should be encouraged to pursue their Christian vocation in service in a state institutional program.”<sup>112</sup> In this example, one sees something of an activist impulse, one that will be nurtured by the development of a new theological system among Mennonites – one that was in many ways a return to their earlier Anabaptist roots.

Other than the fact that the peace churches had to finance these camps, perhaps the most startling thing about the CPS program involved medical experiments. In conjunction with the Office of Scientific Research and Development, between three and five hundred conscientious objectors from CPS Unit 15 took part in medical experiments exploring a variety of issues, with the about three fifths of the participants taking part in studies involving nutrition. This partnership between the CPS and OSRD lasted from 1943-1945. While terms like “experiments”

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<sup>112</sup> Robert S. Kreider, “The Opportunity of the Church.” Anniversary Review, a publication of camp #93. In “Anniversary Review, 1944,” folder 14/99, series IX-13-1. MCC Records Collection, Akron, PA. Living Peace In A Time Of War: The Civilian Public Service Story. Mennonite Central Committee. (accessed, January 17, 2020) <http://civilianpublicservice.org/documents/44>

and “studies” sound clinical, and rather tame, the reality is, these men were guinea pigs, and were part of a program that would never be allowed to take place today for ethical reasons.<sup>113</sup>

A few of examples of the type of experiments that did not involve diet and nutrition will serve to give an idea of what that portion of the program entailed. There was naturally a great deal of concern about the spread of infectious diseases, and the COs in this program allowed themselves to be infected with various diseases so they could be scientifically monitored. Take Pennsylvania Mennonite Samuel Shirk’s experience: “One by one, the men, wearing surgical masks, were escorted to tents in an open field, donned long white gowns, and inhaled deeply as the doctors sprayed the germs into nose and throat.” This particular experiment was to study atypical pneumonia. Shirk acknowledged that while many of the participants were physically weakened by the experiment, he believed that most felt it worthwhile – “...it was all very worthwhile as the doctors explained the prospects of overcoming the terribly annoying and costly common cold, and its counterpart, atypical pneumonia.” Other participants such as Quaker Stephen Angell, who took part in an experiment that eventually led to the development of DDT, felt that the participants could have been better informed about the risks. Other studies dealt with issues such as lice as an agent of communication of disease, and jaundice. One particularly startling experiment dealt with the effects of cold on the human body. Leo Baldwin took part in this experiment in 1945 in conjunction with the University of Rochester School of Medicine. “For the experiment, daily, the men stripped down to their shorts and were stationed on the roof of the hospital for periods of four hours.” Their body temperatures were measured by thermocouples during their time outside. This experiment took place from October through the

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<sup>113</sup> CPS Camp Number 115. Living Peace In A Time Of War: The Civilian Public Service Story. Mennonite Central Committee. (accessed, January 24, 2020) <http://civilianpublicservice.org/camps/115>

middle of December. The men were to be brought in if rain started, or the temperature dropped below about 36 degrees. According to Baldwin, "...the men would sometimes lose consciousness, and have to be revived with the aid of hot showers."<sup>114</sup> Although in this case, the men volunteered to take part, this is reminiscent of studies conducted by the Nazis at roughly the same time period. The idea of putting people on the roof of a building with virtually no clothing on, for hours at a time, in late Fall in upstate New York, in the name of medical science is unthinkable today.

Most of the Conscientious Objectors who took part in medical experiments through Civilian Public Service were involved with studies on diet and nutrition. Liberty Magazine featured an article in their February 16, 1946 edition entitled "What Happens When People Starve," that gave details about one such experiment. The magazine heralded the Minneapolis study as a "scientific opportunity that may never occur again" and attributed it to three unique factors: the cooperation of the volunteers, the availability of state-of-the-art equipment, and the unique mix of scientific expertise working on the project. Thirty-six volunteers committed to one year under complete direction of the leaders of the study. Over the course of the study, the men were reduced to a daily caloric intake of 1,750 calories. By the middle of the study, the men had lost an average of 27 pounds. Their weights continued to decline slowly thereafter. It was discovered that while their strength was reduced somewhat, their stamina was greatly reduced. Fainting was common. The size of their hearts shrank, and their pulse rates dropped

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<sup>114</sup> Reflections from Samuel Allen Shirk. Living Peace In A Time Of War: The Civilian Public Service Story. Mennonite Central Committee. (accessed January 24, 2020) <http://civilianpublicservice.org/reflection-samuel-allen-shirk> ; See also Peter Lester Rohrer and Mary E. Rohrer, *The Story of the Lancaster County Conference Mennonites in Civilian Public Service With Directory*. (NP:1946), 69-71; "Ethics and the Guinea Pig Experiments." Living Peace In A Time Of War: The Civilian Public Service Story. Mennonite Central Committee. (accessed January 24, 2020); <http://civilianpublicservice.org/ethics-and-guinea-pig-experiments> Leo Baldwin: Reflection on Cold Exposure Experiments to Find New Treatment. Living Peace In A Time Of War: The Civilian Public Service Story. Mennonite Central Committee. (accessed January 24, 2020) <http://civilianpublicservice.org/documents/170>

considerably. It was determined that while not in prime condition, they could continue to function at the reduced caloric intake. While there was no noted change in general intelligence, personality was greatly affected. The goal was to be able to help people in war ravaged areas by knowing what the minimum necessary level of nutrition was. The scientists involved in this project felt that the experiment had successfully established that.<sup>115</sup>

Toward the end of the study, the subjects slowly had their caloric intake increased. Four different approaches were taken to bring the men back to normal diet and health. It was soon discovered that simply bringing the men back to a normal caloric intake would not be enough to restore them to pre-experiment levels. The scientists concluded that a significant increase in calories – perhaps as much as 4000 per day along with significant protein intake, over an extended period of time, would be needed to reverse the effects of starvation. Even after five months of recovery, none of the thirty-six volunteers had attained their previous level of physical conditioning. When asked if he would go through the experiment again, one of the volunteers replied “Certainly, if there were the need.”<sup>116</sup> A great deal had been learned about hunger, but at what cost?

### **Public Response to Conscientious Objectors in Civilian Public Service**

The experience of the Conscientious Objectors in the Civilian Public Service Program definitely had its effect on them. They were less sheltered, more acculturated, and had a broader sense of concern about issues outside their immediate circles. These are all key in understanding

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<sup>115</sup> What Happens When People Starve. Living Peace In A Time Of War: The Civilian Public Service Story. Mennonite Central Committee. (accessed January 24, 2020) <http://civilianpublicservice.org/documents/116> Conscientious Objectors Clippings III. 1941-43 folder. MCC Records Collection, Akron, PA.

<sup>116</sup> What Happens When People Starve. Living Peace In A Time Of War: The Civilian Public Service Story. Mennonite Central Committee. (accessed January 24, 2020) <http://civilianpublicservice.org/documents/116> Conscientious Objectors Clippings III. 1941-43 folder. MCC Records Collection, Akron, PA.

the coming changed in the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church. However, at another level, the way in which the general public viewed the COs is also an important matter. The service of these individuals in the CPS camps helped change the way the general public, at least on some levels, understood them. It was clear from the work they did, and the services they provided, that they were not shirkers or cowards.

There are some examples of conflict between residents of CPS camps and locals, such as a rather odd case in Coleville, California in December 1943. A group of COs decided to go Christmas Caroling, and apparently that was not to everyone's liking. One local resident called it an "unwarranted intrusion." Members of this same camp were also criticized for making and sending toys to children in Japanese internment camps. When local citizens complained that the toys should have been sent to needy local white children, the director of the camp explained that he had contacted the American Red Cross and local welfare agencies and been assured that all local children were being cared for regarding Christmas gifts. One camp resident went on to say "I can make no distinction as to color, for the Christian religion does not sanction color discrimination, but says we are brothers. Furthermore to me the Japanese-Americans are as much American citizens as our white children."<sup>117</sup> From a twenty-first century perspective the local citizens quoted in the 1943 newspaper article appear petty and racist. As the author of the article chose to print the COs' responses without commentary, it is possible that others reading

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<sup>117</sup> "Christmas Spirit Backfires" and Other Clippings. Living Peace In A Time Of War: The Civilian Public Service Story. Mennonite Central Committee. (accessed January 17, 2020) <http://civilianpublicservice.org/documents/102> "Conscientious Objectors Clippings III. 1941-43" folder. MCC Records Collection, Akron, PA.

the article may have shared the more modern perspective. At any rate, there are many examples where the COs are clearly shown in a positive light as a result of the CPS service.

The smoke jumpers have already been mentioned and provide an excellent example of how the demeanor of the COs helped change public perceptions. Elmer Neufeld, one of the smoke jumpers, related the following story about his experience with his supervisor – someone who initially did not like the COs. He quotes his supervisor:

It's just that when you guys got here, I had made up my mind that I was sure going to give you Yellow Bellies a rough time. I was going to work the tail end off you and then kick you down the road. Well, that hasn't worked out. There is no way that I can keep up with you personally when it comes to putting out work. You don't make stupid mistakes, and at the end of a day there's a lot of work done."

So, Elmer... ..let me shake your hand and say welcome to our forest. And Yellow Bellies you're not. If you were, you would not have chosen this field of work. There is no way that I would jump out of a perfectly good airplane and depend on a little piece of silk to let me down to the ground. So the hard feelings are gone, at least on my part.<sup>118</sup>

Clearly, the work ethic demonstrated by the COs changed the opinions of those predisposed to dislike them and must have made at least some people begin to view their opposition to war in a new light. It was not just the smoke jumpers who changed minds.

The work done by Conscientious Objectors through the Mental Hygiene Program also drew favorable attention from the wider community and press. After a visit to the Mount Pleasant State Hospital (a mental institution), L.L. Dunnington, minister of the First Methodist Church in Iowa City, Iowa, wrote a letter to the editor of *The Des Moines Register*, which was published on Monday, July 31, 1944. While the main thrust of the letter is to draw attention to

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<sup>118</sup> Reflections From Elmer Neufeld. *Living Peace In A Time Of War: The Civilian Public Service Story*. Mennonite Central Committee. <http://civilianpublicservice.org/reflection-elmer-neufeld> (accessed January 17, 2020.) This quote was taken from a story written by Elmer Neufeld and published in Asa Mundell ed. *Static Lines and Canopies: Stories from the Smokejumpers of 1943-1945, Civilian Public Service Camp 103, Missoula, Montana*. (Beaverton, OR: Asa Mundell, 1993.)



the poor conditions and inadequate funding for the institution, early in the letter Dunnington sings the praises of the COs that had been brought in to help with the institution. “It seems that about 25 Mennonite conscientious objectors and their wives have replaced many of the former workers in this institution. These Mennonite young people are clean, fine looking, outstanding Americans.” While such a description sounds a bit comical to a modern reader, it is clear that the minister was pleased that they had done so much with so little after taking over, as he makes clear as the letter progresses.<sup>119</sup> Such a glowing report on Mennonites who had refused to bear arms in wartime would have been unthinkable during the First World War and shows how much things had changed in the intervening two decades. Dunnington was not the only one to notice and praise the work of the COs in the field of mental health.

“Mennonite conscientious objectors may be a headache to their draft boards, but they have certainly proved to be a boon for the State of Rhode Island.” So begins an article in the *Evening Bulletin*, dated November 17, 1943. In speaking of the 50 or so Mennonites working at the State Hospital for Mental Diseases, the superintendent of the institution, Dr. John R. Ross is quoted as saying “I don’t know what we would have done without them. I only wish we could get a lot more of them.” The author of the article interviewed Earl Heisey, the unofficial spokesman for the Mennonites at the hospital and allows him to explain their position:

Our religious beliefs forbid us to take life. We believe in the teaching of the spirit of non-retaliation, not only when it comes to the defense of our country but even as far as self-defense goes...[we] are mighty glad to contribute something constructive in the cause of the community.

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<sup>119</sup> Letter to the Editor by L.L. Dunnington. Living Peace In A Time Of War: The Civilian Public Service Story. Mennonite Central Committee. <http://civilianpublicservice.org/documents/9> (accessed January 17, 2020.) "Miscellaneous Corr., 1944," folder 16, series IX-6-3. MCC Records Collection, Akron, PA.

The remainder of the article details the numerous ways in which the Mennonites have improved living conditions at the hospital through a variety of means as well as improving morale among the patients by providing entertainment by creating an opportunity for them to sing, watch motion pictures, and improve library facilities at the institution. It portrays the Mennonites in a very favorable light in a region where there would be no ulterior motive. Southern New England is most decidedly not Mennonite country.<sup>120</sup> And this is not an isolated example. Even the more flippant headlines about the work the COs did are clearly positive. Take the following Newark, New Jersey headline: “Conchies Fill Vital Gap at Hospital – They’re Strictly on the Level Declares Doctor at Marlboro” for example.<sup>121</sup> Whatever they may have thought about pacifism, the general public was learning that the Mennonites were not simply afraid to fight. They were also learning that they had something to offer the wider community. Mennonites were learning this as well and this knowledge would help to ease the transition into ever widening engagement with the outside world.

Rachel Waltner Goossen’s groundbreaking study demonstrates that it was not only men who served in the Civilian Public Service projects. Some 2000 women also took part in the programs, by choice. By percentage, Mennonite women made up a greater percentage of CPS workers for their gender (67% were Mennonite) when compared to men (39% were Mennonite.) Goossen did not include women whose husbands were conscientious objectors in these numbers. She was specifically looking at women who volunteered without a definite familial attachment in

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<sup>120</sup> “Mennonites Help Solve Institutional Labor Problem” In the Evening Bulletin. Living Peace In A Time Of War: The Civilian Public Service Story. Mennonite Central Committee. (accessed January 17, 2020) <http://civilianpublicservice.org/documents/15> "Miscellaneous Corr., 1943," folder 10, series IX-6-3. MCC Records Collection, Akron, PA.

<sup>121</sup> “Conchies Fill Vital Gap at Hospital.” Living Peace In A Time Of War: The Civilian Public Service Story. Mennonite Central Committee. <http://civilianpublicservice.org/documents/30>(accessed January 17, 2020) "Director Corr., 1943," folder 9, series IX-6-3. MCC Records Collection, Akron, PA.

the above statistics. She asserts that Mennonite women joined for a variety of reasons – predominantly opposition to the war and a desire to serve humankind, but to a lesser degree for adventure, to learn new skills, and for the opportunity to travel – some of the same reasons other women from that era joined the military. Some Mennonite women volunteered to be near husbands who were serving in the CPS. It should come as no surprise that Mennonite women took part, though until Goossen’s study, their role was largely overlooked.<sup>122</sup>

Like the Mennonite men who served in the CPS, these women spoke of the intellectual freedom they felt while working in the Civilian Public Service and spoke of how it broadened their horizons. Many participants also credited their time in the program as the seed of future activism later in life.<sup>123</sup> Women have played a significant role in Mennonite activism. I will address the role of women in social justice advocacy in Mennonite circles more specifically in Chapters 6 and 7 of this work.

Despite the fact that service as a conscientious objector was much easier, and more accommodating to religious belief, when compared to the World War I experience, and that the general public was slowly coming to appreciate some aspects of the Mennonite approach, not all drafted Mennonites took advantage of this opportunity. Some chose to serve under military direction in non-combatant roles, such as in communications services, or as medics. Others chose full military service in the regular army. In fact, just under 40% of Mennonites drafted during the Second World War served in full military capacity – representing a radical departure from the response of the previous generation. Perhaps the memories of the First World War factored into individual decisions. Perhaps it was a product of increasing acculturation, and

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<sup>122</sup> Rachel Waltner Goossen, *Woman Against the Good War: Conscientious Objection and Gender on the American Homefront, 1941-1947*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997,) 9, 42-43.

<sup>123</sup> Goossen, *Woman Against the Good War*, 124-128.

resistance to it, that decided which avenue individuals would take. There were regional variations as well. In the Western District Conference of the General Conference Mennonite Church (Great Plains region) participation in CPS camps was strongly encouraged, while other regions placed less emphasis on it. While the General Conference Mennonite Church seemed to have had a greater percentage of men willing to serve in the military, there were some in the Mennonite Church also willing to take up arms. Perry Bush asserts that in the Mennonite Church, the failure of leaders to articulate a convincing rationale for nonresistance helps to explain the position of those in the Mennonite Church to bear arms. At any rate, those who served in a full military capacity came home changed as well, albeit in a different fashion than those returning from the CPS camps. Those from the camps came home with new religious ideas, while those from the regular service came home with new, and in the opinion of many, worldly habits such as smoking. While worldly habits were more of an initial shock – so much so that some congregations divide over issues raised not only by military service, but also over new habits and customs, it was the openness to increased acceptance and cooperation with other Christian groups that would have a more lasting and profound change on Mennonites, not only in terms of wider engagement, but also in questions of leadership, with a growing emphasis on the role of the laity.<sup>124</sup>

Paul Toews asserts that while the World War II era, and the large percentage of Mennonite accepting full military service, particularly in the General Conference groups, did indeed show just how much some Mennonites had accultured – even to the point of losing a key religious tenet, there were other forces at work. He claims that more than any other period in the

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<sup>124</sup> Toews, *Mennonites*, 173; Perry Bush, *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties: Mennonite Pacifism in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998,) 87; Horn, “Acculturation”, 31-32; M. Kroeger, “In Death,” 99; A. Johnson interview; D. Haury, *Prairie People*, 210-211, 352, 389.

twentieth century, the post-World War II era provided an opportunity for Mennonites to reorient their identity, and to take more of an activist role, and he credits the experience of the CPS camps for that. He claims that in opposition to the earlier fundamentalist dominated era, the post war period ushered in a group of intellectual leaders that would have previously been regarded as suspicious, many of whom had served in the Civil Public Service program.<sup>125</sup>

### **Changes on the Home Front**

While conditions for draftees were not ideal, they were nonetheless much improved when compared with the First World War. The home front saw less progress. And again, as had been true in the past, conditions were worse in the west, where the General Conference group was strongest. Church buildings, homes, and barns were vandalized with eggs and yellow paint, indicating cowardice, and the intimidation sometimes spread even to those seen as sympathetic to Mennonite Conscientious Objectors. For example, one Oklahoma attorney who assisted Mennonite draftees in their appearance before draft boards was also harassed, and his property was vandalized. Outrageous rumors were spread as well. In one community, the local Mennonite ladies sewing circle was accused of rolling bandages for the Nazis. (One wonders how they would manage to send care packages overseas to the enemy, unnoticed, but logic is not at its strongest during war.) In another area, a visitor saw the Christian flag – a symbol with origins dating back to turn of the century America – and assumed it was a Nazi flag, quickly spreading that story through the local community. In at least one case, a church building was broken into, and an American flag was placed in the center of the sanctuary – where it remained for the duration of the conflict. Other congregations began bringing American flags into their

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<sup>125</sup> Toews, *Mennonites, 180-183*.

buildings to be displayed as well. There were economic repercussions, not only for those families who sent sons to the CPS camps, but also for those who were made guilty simply by association. Rationing boards, staffed at the county level, were very stingy with Mennonites – to the point of actually hurting the war effort. At a time when agricultural output was considered an essential activity, after numerous attempts, one Mennonite farmer was finally allowed authorization to replace tractor tires by the ration board, but only after a sympathetic community member pointed out to the board that this particular gentleman had a son serving in the army.<sup>126</sup>

The World War II experiences of Mennonites hastened acculturation trends that had started after the First World War. The two areas of greatest contention, at least in the west, centered on pacifism, and an association of Mennonites with German culture. The loss of the German language, which had been well underway following the First World War – a feat long accomplished in the Mennonite Church, and among the Swiss/High German General Conference Mennonite congregations that had come out of the Mennonite Church in the middle of the previous century – picked up steam. By the end of the war, the use of German in church services had completely ended, and the use of Low German in the home was also rapidly becoming a thing of the past. Pacifism was also becoming a less central issue, which, given the fact that it was the central issue in bringing Dutch/Low German/Russian Mennonites who had joined the General Conference group to America, was much more significant than the loss of the German language, at least in theological terms. That is not to say that an increased level of comfort with military service was universal – individual congregations, and individuals within congregations that placed less emphasis on the peace doctrine, remained deeply pacifistic. Nevertheless, the

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<sup>126</sup> Horn, “Acculturation”, 33-34; Arn, *The Herald*, 19; Wilma McKee, “Herald: A Caring Country Church” in *Growing Faith: General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma*, ed., Wilma McKee, (North Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1988), 63; Wilma McKee, “Customs and Convictions”, 131; M. Kroeker, “In Death,” 93-95.

presence of military veterans, in good standing in their congregations, gave tangible proof to the possibility that a Mennonite faith, or at the very least, a Mennonite identity, and military service were not incompatible – at least in the General Conference Mennonite Church. Pacifism remained strong within the Mennonite Church, even as changes in systematic theology were taking place, as we shall see shortly.<sup>127</sup> The World War II era brought changes, not just in cultural and religious practice, and not just among General Conference Mennonites in the west, but also a theological shift, developing in the east within the Mennonite Church.

### **Theological Shifts**

As discussed in Chapter 2, the broader changes in Christendom at large, over issues such as science, the study and interpretation of scripture, and changing social norms led to a conservative reaction resulting in the rise of fundamentalism, a way of interpreting scripture that lent itself to a very conservative world view. This rise in fundamentalism had a great influence on leaders of the Mennonite Church, where it came to be the dominant position in the denomination. It also made significant inroads into the General Conference denomination, but again, because this group had always allowed more congregational autonomy, there was a more varied acceptance to this strain of theology. In the 1940s Harold S. Bender, who would become a major force in the Mennonite Church, began to move away from the fundamentalist inspired theology and rhetoric of individuals from earlier in the century such as Daniel Kauffman in the Mennonite Church and Cornelius Wedel in the General Conference Mennonite Church, and began to articulate an approach that he believed to be more uniquely Mennonite. This position came to be known as the Anabaptist Vision. The name for this “new” way of understanding

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<sup>127</sup> Horn, “Acculturation”, 35; Loewen, *Diaspora in the Countryside*, 99.

Mennonite theology took its name from the title of the presidential address that Bender gave at the meeting of the American Society of Church History in New York City on December 28, 1943. He took this opportunity to lay out what he considered to be three basic principles of the older, original, Anabaptist tradition. Bender underlined three distinctive beliefs as setting Anabaptists apart. These included the primacy of discipleship over doctrine, the voluntary nature of the church, and love and nonresistance.<sup>128</sup>

According to Bender, in its original form, Anabaptism stressed discipleship – that is to say a Christ-like lifestyle – over doctrine. As he explains “Anabaptists could not understand a Christianity which made regeneration, holiness, and love primarily a matter of intellect, of doctrinal belief, or subjective ‘experience,’ rather than one of transformation...[t]hey demanded an outward expression of the inner experience.” While he does not call out the individualistic religious aspects of fundamentalism directly, it is difficult not to see the implied criticism. Behavior was clearly more important than specific belief. “The great word of Anabaptists was not ‘faith’ as it was with the reformers, but ‘following.’” This calls to mind the statement from the Second Chapter of James “faith without works is dead.” Bender makes his point clear. “Theology was for them a means, not an end.”<sup>129</sup> In many ways this understanding of faith challenged the legalism and emphasis on systematic theology of Bender’s fundamentalist predecessors such as Kauffman and showcased a recurrent theme among Mennonites – orthodoxy versus orthopraxy.

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<sup>128</sup> Kniss, *Disquiet* 63-83.

<sup>129</sup> Harold S. Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision,” taken from *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18 (April 1944) XIII, 67-88. Goshen College, (accessed, January 20, 2020) <https://www.goshen.edu/mhl/Refocusing/d-av.htm> 3-24.14.15, James 2:26.



Another key tenet of Anabaptism was a church made up of individuals who had willingly chosen to become a part of the group. This belief was the logical outcome of their form of “applied” Christianity. This is the idea that membership is a choice, in fact it is the basis of their moniker. Anabaptist means re-baptizer. “How could infants give a commitment based on knowledge of what true Christianity means?” At a time when all infants were baptized as a matter of course, this meant that committed Anabaptists would be rebaptized upon profession of faith. “Only adult baptism could signify an intelligent life commitment.”<sup>130</sup> The fact that they would be rebaptized, and later, not allow their children to be baptized as infants, clearly shows that they did not throw out doctrine wholesale, but that it could not just be an abstract concept. It had to have a real-world application – in this case a public commitment to a Christ-centered life. Here we see the importance of the community, as well as concern over who is a part of the community.

A third defining characteristic of Anabaptism, as understood by Bender, was applying the principles of love and nonresistance (refusal to use physical force) to all human relationships – perhaps the most difficult and dangerous of their beliefs and practices – as they relinquished the right to protect themselves, even as they simultaneously challenged the religious and political established order. Bender quotes Menno Simons, the Dutch priest turned Anabaptist who gave his name to the Mennonite Church:

The regenerated do not go to war, nor engage in strife.... They are children of peace who have beaten their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and know of no war.... Spears and swords of iron we leave to those who, alas, consider human blood and swine’s blood of well-nigh equal value.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Bender, “Anabaptist Vision”, 18.

<sup>131</sup> Bender, “Anabaptist Vision”, 21-22.

This refusal to use physical force cost the early Anabaptists dearly, with many being forced to flee their homes, and with a number losing their lives, as detailed in *Martyrs Mirror: The Story of Seventeen Centuries of Christian Martyrdom From the Time of Christ Until A.D. 1660*. This work has been translated and republished many times and is dear to many Mennonites.<sup>132</sup>

I will let Bender speak for himself as he concludes a fairly lengthy address:

The Anabaptist vision was not a detailed blueprint for the reconstruction of human society, but the Brethren did believe that Jesus intended that the Kingdom of God should be set in the midst of the earth, here and now, and this they proposed to do forthwith. We shall not believe, they said, that the Sermon on the Mount or any other vision that He had is only a heavenly vision meant but to keep His followers in tension until the last great day, but we shall practice what He taught, believing that where He walked we can by His grace follow in His steps.<sup>133</sup>

Again, as Bender concludes, the implicit criticism of the fundamentalist concern about the end times becomes clear.

Bender sought to lay out an approach to faith and practice that was uniquely Anabaptist/Mennonite, in opposition to the fundamentalism that had made great inroads into Mennonite circles, and that was compelling. At the same time, he claims that the sixteenth century Anabaptists laid the framework for modern American Protestantism. As he said early in his address, “The line of descent through the centuries since that time may not always be clear, and may have passed through other intermediate movements and groups, but the debt to original Anabaptism is unquestioned.”<sup>134</sup> Not only was Bender setting out to counter the trend toward fundamentalism in Mennonite circles, but he was also positing the movement that gave rise to

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<sup>132</sup> Thieleman Van Bragt, *Martyrs Mirror: The Story of Seventeen Centuries of Christian Martyrdom From the Time of Christ Until A.D. 1660*, Translated by Joseph F. Sohm (Scotdale PA: Herald Press, 2010.)

<sup>133</sup> Bender, “Anabaptist, Vision,” 23-24; The Sermon on the Mount is recorded in Matthew 5-6. It was a sermon delivered by Christ, that was concerned with practical matters of how people should relate to one another, and long a touchstone of the behavior Mennonites seek to practice.

<sup>134</sup> Bender “Anabaptist Vision,” 4.

the Mennonites as the genesis for what had come to be viewed as inherently American ideals such as freedom of conscience and separation of church and state. This was a bold statement, coming as it were from an American pacifist of German ancestry in the midst of the Second World War, though probably a bit easier than for a General Conference Mennonite in the west, more recently arrived, for reasons that have already been discussed.

The World War II period was pivotal within Mennonite circles, both among Swiss/High German Mennonites in the east and among Dutch/Low German/Russian Mennonites in the west. A host of changes, cultural, theological, and practical, occurred, though not with complete uniformity. The experience of the Civilian Public Service program that many conscientious objectors participated in also helped to broaden horizons and break down barriers. This era continued to lay the groundwork not only for cooperation between the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church, but also for dissent and factionalism within those two denominations.

The post-World War II era found the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church much altered from what they were in the 1920s. A host of issues conspired to bring about change. The Great Depression and the New Deal brought increased interaction not only with the federal government, but also through greater exposure to popular culture as made possible via technology. This was particularly evident among General Conference congregations in the west. At the same time, theological changes were afoot. The Civilian Public Service program put Mennonites who remained strongly committed to pacifism in direct, prolonged contact with people from other religious traditions, even as the percentage of Mennonites engaging in military service increased, exposing those individuals to an entirely different environment as well. These changes wrought not only social change, but planted seeds of

theological change, and new ideas regarding social justice – an issue that will take a prominent place in the following chapter.

Leaders such as Harold Bender, in the Mennonite Church, began to directly challenge many of the underlying assumptions of the fundamentalism that had made such inroads among Mennonites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As he articulated his “Anabaptist Vision” as a more historically accurate theology for Mennonites, fissures began to appear. Paul Toews has characterized Bender’s Anabaptist Vision as an attempt to find a “usable past” – an identity that Mennonites uncomfortable with fundamentalism in all its iterations could rally behind, an identity that he posits as a more acceptable way to adapt to twentieth century life, one that would in the years to come allow Mennonites who adhered to it to both integrate into their surrounding society and yet remain separate in some sense. Toews also places Guy F. Hershberger’s *War, Peace, and Nonresistance* in this category.<sup>135</sup> Hershberger will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5 in relations to civil rights and Vietnam.

As Steven Nolt has pointed out, there was a rising interest in Anabaptist history in the 1940s, and Bender was not the only scholar in Mennonite circles exploring the topic. Even so, the importance of Bender’s work cannot be overstated. Nolt has characterized the theology of Anabaptism as put forth by Bender as “neo-Anabaptism,” describing it as distinct both from the fundamentalism it was reacting to, and from the spirituality of evangelicalism which could and did sometimes stand apart from fundamentalism. He describes it as activist in nature and claims that it had a tremendous impact on Mennonites in the United States and beyond, often through the agency of educational institutions. Perry Bush has shown that strong interest in the

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<sup>135</sup> Toews, *Mennonites*, 82-83.

Anabaptist Vision continued for decades, claiming that in the hands of Mennonite college students of the 1970s, it grew in some ways to look like the New Left.<sup>136</sup>

While many were captivated by the ideas of Bender and Hershberger, others retreated further into fundamentalism. As discussed in Chapter 2, Daniel Kauffman had introduced fundamentalism into the Mennonite Church, and with it, a greater emphasis on outward separation in matters of dress and behavior, giving it a definite Mennonite flavor – one that elevated cultural conservatism to the same level of importance as theological conservatism, according to Perry Bush. As Paul Toews has noted, a group that viewed itself as separate from the surrounding society should logically have rejected such a new and decidedly American idea – one that read the Bible in a way Mennonites had not been accustomed to – but when combined with an emphasis on Mennonite distinctives, and under the strong leadership of a well-known bishop, the allure of this Mennonite Fundamentalism was hard to resist and would outlive Kauffman. Indeed, it remained alive and well as will be shown in Chapters, 4, 5, 6, and 7. There was a strong vein of fundamentalism in the General Conference Mennonite Church as well, but without the distinct dress, it was less visible.<sup>137</sup>

Still others adopted a more American-style fundamentalism – one amenable even to military service. This group adopted the conservative approach of mainstream fundamentalism as practiced by other conservative Christian groups without some of the distinctives as espoused by the followers of Kauffman’s Mennonite fundamentalism, all-the-while maintaining a Mennonite identity of sorts. This group could occasionally be found in the Mennonite Church,

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<sup>136</sup> Royden Loewen and Steven M. Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2012), 152-156; Bush, *Two Kingdoms*, 247-248.

<sup>137</sup> Bush, *Two Kingdoms*, 32-32; Toews, *Mennonites*, 64-83.

but was more prevalent in the General Conference Mennonite Church.<sup>138</sup> This group would become more vocal and more visible as successive waves of social change swept over both the general American public and Mennonites, as will be discussed in following chapters.

The tensions between Mennonite Fundamentalism, more mainstream American fundamentalism in Mennonite circles, and a rising concern for social justice among those who accept the “Anabaptist Vision” became more obvious as time passed. While still experiencing numerical growth, there were growing tensions that would eventually manifest in declining membership in the Mennonite Church. How can we best explain this? Mennonites strove mightily to preserve and protect their communities from being influenced by worldly forces, especially those beyond their power to control. In the latter years of the last century, strong protest movements on the right and the left of the American cultural spectrum changed the national discourse and, in some very important ways, the nation itself. The Civil Rights movement which reverberated with special force from the middle 1950s into the 1970s could not help but have a powerful impact on Mennonites—and it did. There was a rising concern for a new “social justice” vision that required engagement with the secular world, not removal from it. As this vision unified some constituencies in American society, so too did it ultimately strengthen a belief in certain traditional values—in theology and in society itself.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Bush, *Two Kingdoms*, 45-49.

<sup>139</sup> For a general discussion of the political and social movements of the 1960s, see Maurice Isserman and Micjhael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); For a discussion of how changes in law reframed the national discourse around issues of race, see Ben Keppel, *Brown V. Board and the Transformation of American Culture: Education in the South in the Age of Desegregation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016); For a discussion of the impact of economics and social change on religious belief and practice in the United States, see Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011) Although this work centers on changes in southern California, it speaks clearly to factors in play nation-wide that drew many evangelicals into conservative politics in the 1960s and 1970s. For a discussion around how the Vietnam Conflict led to realignment in American religious groups, see George Bogaski, *American Protestants and the Debate Over the Vietnam War: Evil Was Loose in the World* (New York: Lexington Books, 2014); For a discussion of the rise of

As I discussed at some length in Chapter 1, there is, as Martin Marty has argued, a great danger of analytical distortion that can come from applying a market-based analysis to the deliberations of religious communities. While I agree with Marty about this, if we are to understand the decline that we see in the Mennonite Church USA, the analysis of Finke and Starke, and others who make use of a market-oriented lens, provides some needed clarity. The 1970s and 1980s, years of economic instability and a resulting fear of social and economic decline, caused a market value approach to regain some of the ideological currency it lost when the claims for “social justice” were ascending. Thus, the analysis of Finke and Starke can help us to see the way in which Mennonite divisions and decline were part of a larger development in the United States.

The departure of some of these individuals and congregations (those most committed to Mennonite Fundamentalism) from the Mennonite Church would allow that group to merge with the General Conference group – a denomination in which all three streams were largely able to remain united. While growing more slowly, and the smaller of the two bodies, the defections that the Mennonite Church would experience by and large did not plague the General Conference Mennonite Church. This strange turn of events helped to explain the discord in the Mennonite Church USA after the two groups combined as described in later chapters. Chapter 4 will examine this growing division within the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church against the backdrop of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

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the religious right see Daniel Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); See also William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996); See also Ruth Murray Brown, *For a "Christian America": A History of the Religious Right* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002

## Chapter 4 – Official Denominational Responses to Issues of Racial Justice

Neither the Mennonite Church nor the General Conference Mennonite Church were exempt from the effects of the civil rights movement as it gained traction in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. Despite their somewhat disparate histories regarding contact and relationships with African Americans, both denominations had made official statements regarding questions of race by the end of the 1950s. The separate histories of the two denominations, as well their differences in relative geographic strength gave them not only unique backstories, but also influenced the speed with which they articulated their stance on issues of race. These unique histories also help to explain the rather dissimilar level of detail contained therein when these statements were issued. I begin this chapter by examining the official statements of each body, with special emphasis on that of the Mennonite Church, and then address the race related history of each group that preceded the publication of these official positions. Following that, I will explore the way the two groups continued to evolve following these official pronouncements. In this chapter I rely heavily on the stories of two individuals to illustrate the ways the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church tackled the issue of race. Vincent Harding, a well-known civil rights activist and historian, was for a time an ordained minister in the General Conference Mennonite Church, though he eventually left the group. Less well known, but no less important in understanding the complicated relationship between African Americans and Mennonites, is James Lark, the first African American to be ordained a bishop in the Mennonite Church. Unlike Harding, Lark remained a Mennonite until his death. Their stories, as told through articles in the Mennonite press both by and about them, as well as published interviews of Vincent Harding, showcase both the



successes and failures of twentieth century Mennonites as they grappled with the intersection of faith and racial justices.

This chapter seeks to situate James Lark more fully within the historical record of Mennonites and the civil rights movement, as his role has tended to be eclipsed by the higher profile Vincent Harding for reasons that will become clear. While more scholarship has been done on Harding in Mennonite circles, particularly by Tobin Miller Shearer, these works have focused primarily on how Harding impacted the civil rights movement in Mennonite circles. The latter portion of this chapter will explore the ways Mennonites may have impacted Harding's work as an historian.

Additionally, this chapter looks at the varied responses of white Mennonites from both denominations to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In doing so, the growing differences between Mennonite Fundamentalists, Mennonites who accepted American fundamentalism, and followers of the Anabaptist Vision will become increasingly clear, as representatives of all three schools of thought responded to questions of race in different ways. This three-way division is key to understanding what made unification of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite possible, as well as explain some of the problems the unified Mennonite Church USA experienced in the twenty-first century.

In 1955, the Mennonite Church described its official position on issues of race in a statement entitled "The Way of Love in Christian Race Relations." The statement begins with the rationale for what is to come, explaining how racism hinders the work of spreading the gospel. "Not only has this tension led to social antagonism and international ill will, but it has created conditions that have made the advance of the Gospel difficult and it has dimmed the

Christian witness.” The statement acknowledged that racism is present not only in society at large, but also within the church:

Among the forces of evil challenging the advance of Christianity is a prejudice which many Christians feel towards those who are of a color or of a national origin different from their own. This prejudice, usually growing out of a feeling of superiority, often leads church members, as well as others, to practice various forms of discrimination contrary to the teachings and spirit of the Gospel.<sup>140</sup>

This statement also claims that such feelings of racism hurt not only the target of the ill will, but also the perpetrator.

The victims of this kind of unjust treatment often become bitter towards their oppressors. Furthermore, those who have been guilty of attitudes of prejudice and superiority have been unable to experience the fullness of the Christian life.<sup>141</sup>

Finally, in the introduction, the document positions itself within the history of the Mennonite movement, and foreshadows their use of scripture in bolstering their denouncement of racism.

As a fellowship of Christians which throughout its four hundred years of history has placed great emphasis in all human relations upon Christian brotherhood and the way of love, we must periodically reexamine our application of the faith which we profess in order to maintain and promulgate a vital witness in our time. This is the faith in our Lord and Master who is the true revelation of God; in the Holy Scriptures which are the written revelation of Jesus Christ; and in the way of the cross as given in His teachings, in His life, and in His death.”<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> “The Way of Christian Love” 1955. The Mennonite Church. (accessed 03/28/2020)  
[https://anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php?title=The\\_Way\\_of\\_Christian\\_Love\\_in\\_Race\\_Relations\\_\(Mennonite\\_Church,\\_1955\)](https://anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php?title=The_Way_of_Christian_Love_in_Race_Relations_(Mennonite_Church,_1955))

<sup>141</sup> “The Way of Christian Love.”

<sup>142</sup> “The Way of Christian Love.”

The main body of the statement is laid out in four major sections, 1) the teachings of the Bible, 2) the history of the church, 3) categorical statement of segregation and discrimination as sin, and 4) and a discussion of how the Mennonite Church ought to respond, followed by a brief conclusion. Under section 1, which deals with the Bible, the statement addresses a number of issues, beginning with the unity of man under creation, asserting that both science and the Bible indicate that all people are one, and that physical and cultural difference have no significance in terms of worth. They use Acts 17:26 as the Biblical basis for their first line of argument. “And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth...” This subsection then precedes on to the unity of man in the order of grace, explaining that all have sinned, and that salvation is open to all alike, relying on Romans 3:22-24 "No distinction is made, for all alike have sinned, and consciously fall short of the glory of God, but are acquitted freely by His grace through the ransom given in Christ Jesus..." among others. This is followed by arguments about the unity of Christian fellowship, again giving multiple Biblical quotes, including Colossians 3:11 “Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all...” The section dealing with the Bible ends with the subheading “The Way of the Cross in Race Relations” in which the statement asserts “we must reach aggressively across all barriers with the call of the Gospel, to include all who repent in the fellowship of the church.” Section 1 also locates opposition to racism within the church’s teaching on nonresistance: “To refuse participation in warfare demands that Christians likewise rise above the practices of discrimination and coercion in other areas, such as race relations.”<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> “The Way of Christian Love.”

The second section, dealing with church history, argues the throughout much of church history, ethnic background was of little importance, and when it did arise, as in the debate about whether Greek Christians should be required to be circumcised, the church (in this case the Council of Jerusalem) came down on the side of nondiscrimination (the Greek Christians were not required to follow Jewish customs.) This section represents the shortest part of the document.<sup>144</sup>

The third section specifically calls out segregation and discrimination as sin and touches on a number of issues in this argument. The section begins by claiming that racial discrimination is a recent development. Despite this rather dubious claim, the writers nonetheless call out the church for buying into discriminatory practices:

Out of this situation has grown a vast mythology to the effect that people of color constitute a race which has a different ancestry from that of the Caucasian, and which in every way is inferior to it. Unfortunately, some Christian people have even deepened the confusion by claiming to find Biblical sanction and support for this myth. Thus many Christians find themselves in a position where they deny the basic principles of the Gospel, both in theory and, in practice, in a manner never found before in the history of the church.<sup>145</sup>

The second part of section 3 gets to the heart of the issue: “We believe that racial prejudice and discrimination, as illustrated in the American pattern of segregation, or wherever it may be found, is a sin.” The statement then presents a specific list explaining why, including the idea that it is a violation of their faith, as well as morals, and a harm to the God-given rights of the victims. The final part of this section lists the consequences of this sin, in ways that seem to make sense and fall in line with the rest of the document – hurts both victim and perpetrator, harms society, etc. There is one consequence listed that seems to stand apart from the spirit of

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<sup>144</sup> “The Way of Christian Love.”

<sup>145</sup> “The Way of Christian Love.”

the rest of the document, but makes sense, at least in terms of the broader culture, from a 1950s American perspective: “It strengthens the hand of atheistic communism which claims to do away with the very sin which many Christians still defend.” This line of reasoning had a Mennonite spin to it, but shades of the then recent Red Scare are clearly visible. Fear of communism was a feature of both fundamentalist strains in Mennonite circles – found in proponents of American style fundamentalism as well as among those pursuing Mennonite Fundamentalism.<sup>146</sup>

The final, rather lengthy, section deals with the Mennonite response, beginning with a specific confession of sin:

As Christians we therefore humbly confess our sins... ..we have failed to see that mere nonparticipation in violence and bloodshed is not an adequate expression of the doctrine of love to all men... ..we have failed to see that acceptance of the social patterns of segregation and discrimination is a violation of the command to be "not conformed to this world." ...we have been silent when others showed race prejudice and practiced discrimination. Too often our behavior has been determined by our selfish considerations of public and social approval more than by our desire to accept the way of the cross. Some of us have accepted the false propaganda of racism and anti-Semitism which has come into our homes in the guise of Christian literature... ..we have equated our own culture with Christianity... For these and our many other sins we repent before our fellow men and our God.<sup>147</sup>

This lengthy confession of sin, in which we see a tacit acknowledgement of acculturation (acceptance of mainstream racism), is followed by a statement of hope for better things in the future, and then a list of specific actions to be followed. These actions include integration where dual, race segregation congregations exist, conducting camps and programs on an interracial basis, increased sensitivity to discriminatory practices in social and business settings, and increased interracial social contact, among others. The final part of section 4 deals with specific

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<sup>146</sup> “The Way of Christian Love.”

<sup>147</sup> “The Way of Christian Love.”

concepts that are to be taught within the church, including correct Biblical teaching – correcting misconceptions that scripture advocates segregation, ending the use of racist language, and demonstrating that there is no scientific basis for qualitative difference between races. The last statement in section 4 deals with interracial marriage.

That on the question of interracial marriage we help our people to understand that the only Scriptural requirement for marriage is that it be "in the Lord"; that there is no valid biological objection to interracial marriage; and that, as in all marriages, the social implications of any proposed union should receive careful consideration."<sup>148</sup>

Taken as whole, the statement is fairly bold and progressive, both from the standpoint of the Mennonites, as well as from the perspective of rank-and-file white Americans in the mid-1950s. The confession of sin, and the list of proposed remedies showed, at least at the level of denomination leadership, a real understanding of how scripture had been coopted and misinterpreted to maintain an unjust system, and how Mennonites had been complicit, and at times actively involved, in this injustice. The final major claim that there was no scriptural basis for a prohibition against interracial marriage was radical at a time when multiple states outlawed such unions, but the final clause about careful consideration of the social implications of interracial marriage seems to negate much of the statement preceding it, though this caution was foreshadowed in earlier pieces that ran in *The Gospel Herald*, the official denominational magazine – pieces that will be analyzed in the coming pages. This seeming concession to social pressure assures that issues of race would continue to plague the Mennonite Church in the years to come.<sup>149</sup> While the foregoing discussion of this statement is lengthy, it is key in showing the amount of thought the Mennonite Church put into the issue of race, and foreshadows future areas

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<sup>148</sup> "The Way of Christian Love."

<sup>149</sup> "The Way of Christian Love"; Paul Erb, "Interracial Marriage" *The Gospel Herald* June 24, 1952, 611.

of conflict between theology and practice – helping to explain why this was such a fraught issue, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s.

The General Conference Mennonite Church, having far less interactions with African Americans, did not release a race relations document until 1959. When it was issued, the less robust document, “A Christian Declaration on Race Relations,” made no mention of interracial marriage, and the denominations did not officially address that specific issue until 1962, when the secretary of the denomination’s Peace Section, at the request of the group’s Peace and Social Concerns Committee, addressed the issue via a mass mailing. Far from a major reworking of thought, he simply used the wording of the Mennonite Church’s 1955 document on interracial marriage and added that to the General Conference’s 1959 document. Tobin Shearer posits that this was because of demographic differences – the General Conference Group had fewer couples in such unions, so it seemed less of a concern. I would concur, but based on my personal observations, I would also argue that the many in the General Conference Mennonite Church were even more in tune with mainstream opposition to interracial marriage than were members of the Mennonite Church. “Mennonite Fundamentalism” in General Conference circles never had the same draw that it did in the Mennonite Church. At the time it was taking hold, most General Conference Mennonite did not have a style of dress to separate them – a key feature of “Mennonite Fundamentalism” in the Mennonite Church. As military service was becoming more acceptable during and after World War II, there was even less to distinguish mainstream American fundamentalists from “Mennonite Fundamentalists” in the General Conference group, though that group was not entirely absent as will be shown in succeeding chapters. As such, by the 1960s most General Conference Mennonites were either of the more mainstream American fundamentalism camp (with its opposition to interracial marriage) or the “Anabaptist Vision”

camp (which was more accepting of such unions). There was less of a moderate option, such as the “Mennonite Fundamentalists” (also cautious about such marriages) offered in the Mennonite Church. Although the churches’ official positions were clear by the early 1960s, the issue refused to die. There were multiple articles in the publications of both denominations addressing this ongoing controversy in Mennonite circles. In order to understand why the Mennonite Church took such a proactive stance, at least compared to General Conference Mennonite Church, it is important to look at the different histories of interaction with African Americans of the two denominations.<sup>150</sup>

### **Early History of Mennonites Regarding Race**

The first statement opposing slavery in North America was issued in Germantown, Pennsylvania, in 1688, and explicitly relied on religious principles: “There is a saying that we shall doe [sic] to all men like as we will be done ourselves; making no difference of what generation, descent, or colour [sic] they are.” The writers of this document are clearly referencing Matthew 7:12 – what is known as the “golden rule.” While the statement was drafted by Quakers, Mennonites were among the signatories on this document – a fact Mennonites have long been quick to point out in defending their record on race relations. While being among the first to denounce slavery is an admirable position, the Mennonite record over the next two and half centuries left much wanting. Mennonite outreach to African Americans was slow – the first Mennonite outreach to African Americans did not occur until the 1880s, and the body that began that work was neither the Mennonite Church nor the General Conference Mennonite Church, but a smaller Dutch/Low German/Russian denomination from the Great

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<sup>150</sup> Tobin Miller Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 297-298, 146; Eugene Theisen, interviewed by Eddie Chet Horn. Cordell, OK, May 12, 2010.



Plains, which began outreach work in North Carolina. Indeed, the Mennonite Church did not receive its first African American – Cloyd Carter – into membership until 1887. By the 1930s, there were a handful of predominantly African American congregations in the Mennonite Church, including Crossroads Mennonite Church, and Diamond Street Mennonite Church, both in Pennsylvania. This rather slow start greatly outpaced African American membership in the General Conference Mennonite Church, though it must be remembered that most of the General Conference membership resided in states with small African American populations, and that these Mennonites were relatively recent immigrants to the United States.<sup>151</sup>

As African Americans began to enter the Mennonite Church, they faced challenges. Some in Mennonite circles had been deeply influenced by the eugenics movement, beginning in the late nineteenth century. In fact, in an 1889 article in the Mennonite Church publication *The Herald of Truth*, Abram B. Kolb wrote an article entitled “The Race Troubles” in which he laid out his opposition to interracial marriage, using then current arguments without reference to scripture.<sup>152</sup> Kolb was early, but hardly alone in such thought.

Daniel Kauffman, the Mennonite Church leader who had hardily embraced fundamentalism at the turn of the century, had apparently also adopted other theories from contemporary America. Take this editorial piece on the front page of the January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1943 edition of *The Gospel Herald*:

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<sup>151</sup> *Germantown Friends’ Protest Against Slavery, 1688* Library of Congress, (accessed May, 27,2020) <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.14000200/?st=text>; Le Roy Bechler, *The Black Mennonites Church in North America: 1886-1986* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1986), 37-41; Lancaster Mennonite Conference: A Fellowship of Anabaptist Church. History. (accessed February 3, 2020) <https://lmcchurches.org/about-us/history/#>  
<sup>152</sup> Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators*, 134; Abram B. Kolb, “The Race Troubles,” *Herald of Truth*, November 15, 1889, 341-343.

This is the appropriate time to turn the light of truth upon race suicide, otherwise known as “birth control” (more properly called birth prevention). The use of contraceptives is a thousand miles removed from the divine admonition, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.” And the longer that Christian people toy with the charm of “birth control,” while non-Christian peoples follow the due course of nature, the more completely the white race will become overwhelmed by the hordes of colored (and renegade white) races.<sup>153</sup>

The racism is clear, and all the more egregious when one considers what was then taking place in Europe, based on the very same logic and rhetoric. Though it is doubtful he would have explicitly said that only whites could become Christian, Kauffman is clearly equating Christianity with race, ethnic background, and economic status. It is doubtful that what he terms “renegade white races” were on equal economic footing with Germanic people such as himself. As discussed in Chapter 3, Harold S. Bender, and his “Anabaptist Vision” were beginning to pull people away from the fundamentalism of Kauffman, but it was not an overnight switch – indeed, many never made the change. And while one cannot definitively say that all fundamentalists of the era were eugenicists, the link between the two turn of the century ideologies, at least for Kauffman, is clear – immediately following his piece on “race suicide” is a lengthy treatment of the infallibility of scripture, a key component of fundamentalism, and one of his favorite topics. Given his status as both a Bishop in the denomination, and the editor of their main periodical, the impact of his words cannot be discounted. Little wonder that relatively few African Americans had become Mennonite.

Though Mennonites in the early to mid-twentieth century often claimed that racism was a worldly concern that did not affect the church, the reality of practice negates such a claim – a view that was doubtless preposterous to the few African American Mennonites that existed. The

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<sup>153</sup> Daniel Kauffman, editorial, *The Gospel Herald*, January 7, 1943, 865.

racism so apparent in Kauffman's work found practical application within official church policy. From the end of World War I through the mid-1940s, Mennonite Churches, at least officially, accepted the status quo of racial segregation, with the Virginia Conference of the Mennonite Church enacting specific policies regarding segregation in communion services. This adopting of the racial norms of the dominant society surrounding these Mennonites are clear signs of assimilation. Indeed, Tobin Shearer, in his work *Daily Demonstrators*, argues this point persuasively. While some individual members did strongly oppose this move, they were the exception rather than the rule, and not surprisingly, given that such opposition in some cases led to their dismissal. Even so, there were some specific mission efforts directed at African Americans. Financial support for these projects was difficult to maintain, and assignments to such missions were often not renewed. Generally, the church hierarchy tended *not* to interfere with individually initiated endeavors to minister to places that included African Americans – though these efforts themselves often had more than a hint of paternalism present. Interestingly, missionary efforts *in* Africa tended to be more popular and better supported than outreach to African Americans, as they did not create uncomfortable problems at home.<sup>154</sup>

Racist ideology, particularly as it dealt with interracial marriage, was not limited to specific congregational, conference, or denominational policies, but continued to find voice in the official periodicals of both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church. *The Gospel Herald* was a publication of the Mennonite Church. In a 1952 editorial by Paul Erb, we get a sense of the denomination's view of interracial marriage. The article attempts to situate racial strife within an international context, in a clear reference to the then current conflict in Korea. "Problems of race relations are pressing for a solution in today's world. In

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<sup>154</sup> Shearer, *Daily Demonstrator*, 7-8.

America, in Africa, and in Asia there are tensions that must be eased if disastrous conflicts are not to result.” Erb then addressed issues of segregation in America, and connected the issue of interracial marriage to that debate:

Many people who try to think through the implications of Christian love and brotherhood feel that the patterns of segregation which have developed through the years in many areas are wrong and ought to be abolished. But very often when such ideas are set forth, someone comes up with the question, “Are you advocating marriage between the races?”<sup>155</sup>

Erb argues that this is a straw man argument against abolishing social segregation.

“People who argue for racial equality are thinking, for the most part, of equal political, economic and social privileges. They may still feel that people will be happier if they marry within their own race.” He seems to be arguing that one can support integration, while still opposing interracial marriage, and he claims that this is a position held to by almost all concerned. “The less privileged races will usually say that they are not asking for intermarriage, but only for an equal chance at employment, and the privilege of living, eating, setting, traveling, and worshipping where they will.” He is arguing that, in many ways, interracial marriage, and the desire for it, are rare, and should not be used as an excuse to oppose desegregation. He does, however, address the issue as a possibility “But what shall we say if young people of different races... ..should fall in love and desire to marry? Has Christianity a clear directive in such a case?” He answers vaguely that “an arbitrary answer is impossible.”<sup>156</sup>

Having posed the question and stated that the answer was not a simple one, he goes into issues about what constitute race, and provides both historical and recent cultural examples of mixed raced marriage, arguing that in the context of Brazil, for example, where such unions are

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<sup>155</sup> Paul Erb, “Interracial Marriage”, 611.

<sup>156</sup> Erb, “Interracial Marriage”, 611.

common “we should probably not try to make a moral issue of the matter.” However, it becomes clear that he does not think that is the case in United States. In opposition to interracial marriage, he trots out cultural and social situations that he feels are pertinent to 1950s America. He says social resistance to such unions remains “very strong,” and explains his position thusly: “We have to live in our society as it is. If that society has prejudices and makes distinctions, and we choose to flout those distinctions, we must be prepared to accept the consequences.” Having acknowledged that individuals in love might be willing to brave the social displeasure an interracial marriage might bring he then makes his case by appealing to such individual to “think of their children.” He goes on to say “In a segregated society the children of mixed marriages are classed with the less privileged race. Their parents must be prepared to explain and to comfort the hurts that are pretty sure to come.” It is as if he is encouraging people, when confronted with what is right, versus what is “practical,” to choose the latter.<sup>157</sup>

In the final analysis, Erb acknowledges that there is no scriptural reason for prohibiting interracial marriage. “All we find [in the Bible] is a minimizing of racial distinctions... ..we can hardly call it [interracial marriage] unscriptural.” But in almost the same breath he says “We *may* call interracial marriage unwise...” Having shown that there was no injunction in the New Testament against interracial marriage and saying that all that was found therein was a diminishing of racial differences, he closes by undercutting that argument, taking a scripture out of context.

One may follow the Apostle Paul in saying to interracial lovers that, if they will, they may marry, but since “they will have trouble in the flesh” (I Cor. 7:28) it would seem the wiser thing to marry among one’s own kind of folks. This is an area where we may counsel, but where we must not judge.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Erb, “Interracial Marriage”, 611.

<sup>158</sup> Erb, “Interracial Marriage”, 611.

The context of this scripture has nothing to do with interracial marriage. In this passage (1 Corinthians 7), Paul is addressing the question of marriage broadly, and makes the point that while he advocates celibacy for those, like him, who are able to do so, it is preferable to marry, rather than to burn with uncontrolled passion – hence the phrase in the ceremony in the *Book of Common Prayer* which describes marriage as “a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication that such persons as have not the gift of continency [the ability to remain chaste in an unmarried state] might marry...” This interpretation is clearly in line with the context of the passage. This is also the passage the Roman Catholic Church uses to promote priestly celibacy. As a minister and professor, Erb knew that this passage had nothing to do with interracial marriage, and everything to do with the institution of marriage itself. People are a product of their time, but it is disappointing to see someone – particularly someone who knew better – twisting scripture to support an unsupportable position.<sup>159</sup>

This article foreshadowed the official position taken by the Mennonite Church at the end of the decade – interracial marriage was not a sin, but there were reasons not to support it, a position commonly held among American protestants at the time. An article like this calls into question how a nonconformist sect could take such a position as “We have to live in our society as it is.” This type of argument lays the groundwork for African American Mennonites who would use the nonconformist stance of the church to challenge just such thinking.

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<sup>159</sup> Erb, “Interracial Marriage”, 611; “The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony,” *The Book of Common Pray*, 1662; Daniel Hertzler, "Erb, Paul (1894-1984)" *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. (accessed, February 3, 2020)[https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Erb,\\_Paul\\_\(1894-1984\)&oldid=160404](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Erb,_Paul_(1894-1984)&oldid=160404)

Within a few short months, *The Mennonite*, the official publication of the General Conference Mennonite Church similarly weighed in. The October 28, 1952 edition of *The Mennonite* devoted a number of articles to issues surrounding Africa and people of African descent. Titles included “The Growing Church in Congo,” “Congo Hair,” “Why Missions in Congo,” “Brown Logic,” “African Marriage,” “Conference – Congo Style,” and “African Protein.” Although some of these titles seem appropriate to a religious publication reporting on foreign missions, others seem paternalistic, and hint at the idea of the exotic “other,” striking the contemporary eye as inherently racist. Toward the end of the issue, under the section entitled Mennonite Youth, was the following article: “Do You Want Your Daughter to Marry a Negro?” – seemingly an odd piece for the “Youth” section of a publication – one would assume few youths would have had a daughter of marriageable age – the racism of the title notwithstanding.

D.W.B., the rather anonymous writer of this piece opens with the following lines, referring to the title:

The above questions is supposed to be a “stumper”; no matter how one answers it the answer will be “wrong” to most people. The Christian runs up against this question quite frequently.”

The author proceeds to explain why he or she feels this question so often came before Christians.<sup>160</sup>

D.W.B. begins by explaining that the differences between the people of the earth are superficial: “Furthermore, as the sincere Christian observes the people of the earth, he is unable to discover significant differences among them.” The author goes on to discuss differences in language, skin color, and custom, and ends with the religious idea that all are equal before God – “since all mankind can alike become the children of God they should mutually respect each other

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<sup>160</sup> D.W.B. “Do You Want Your Daughter to Marry a Negro?” *The Mennonite*, October 28, 1952, 684.

for that possibility... . . . All alike are loved by God.” Then comes the “but” section of the argument.<sup>161</sup>

The author argues that given the oneness of mankind, and the love of God for all, discussions about race “must eventually run up against the question of intermarriage.” D.W.B. concludes that because interracial marriage, to most people is “a paralyzing thing,” people seek to avoid discussing racial issues, claiming that this “happens more frequently in the North than the South.” Even a fleeting review of civil rights history will confirm that the means and out-workings of racism had regional differences. For the purposes of my analysis of this article the reasons why there may have been more discussion of interracial marriage in the North is less important than the fact the author situates this particular issue in a region with more numerous Mennonite churches. The author clearly finds the issue of interracial marriage to be an impediment to what he or she sees as the mission of the church:

This is unfortunate, for the fear of interracial marriage has become a phobia. When minds run against that thought they indeed become frightened; they are no longer open to growth and to the sharing of helpful and constructive ideas.<sup>162</sup>

D.W.B. classifies the fear of interracial marriage as an “imaginary fear.” The piece then proceeds to explain why this is apparently a nonissue. “Almost all sociologists and religious leaders of all races advise against it [interracial marriage] in our present class-conscious [sic] world.” This statement hints at the economic aspect of racial inequality, and the author continues that theme with the following claim:

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<sup>161</sup> D.W.B. “Do You,” 684.

<sup>162</sup> D.W.B. “Do You,” 684.



In all my own discussions with Negroes... ..I have met only two who expressed any interest whatever in marrying outside their own race. And they readily admitted that their interest was economic only; other races lived better...<sup>163</sup>

The author goes on to state that there will always be “a few here and there who will turn from their own intimate groups for marriage partners... ..the number is small now and it would become smaller if the economic advantages of the different groups were similar.” Compared with much of what was on offer in the early 1950s regarding race, this is nominally less egregious, in that it at least acknowledges the injustice of the vast economic disparities faced by African Americans. Nevertheless, the sweeping claim that interracial marriage is a problem, and that it was economically motivated, and would be “solved” if economic conditions were to improve for minorities is arrogant in the extreme. The author ends the article with these words:

Why not talk then of ways to help each other, of how to overcome our fears and phobias and work together for the coming of Christ’s kingdom among all of us everywhere? Such discussion is both urgent and important. Fruitless discussions of interracial marriage are not.<sup>164</sup>

The argument presented here is complicated, in that it shows both the strengths and weaknesses of the Mennonite understanding and response to racism, particularly in the General Conference Mennonite Church. The idea that African Americans are somehow less, is refuted, and the economic impacts of racism are acknowledged, and there is an implicit call to correct that. At the same time, the idea of opposition to interracial marriage is presented as a strawman argument that impedes serious discussions about racism, rather than as another aspect of racism that needs to be addressed. This piece is significant regarding Mennonites for a couple of reasons. On the one hand, this piece clearly shows, as Tobin Shearer has pointed out, the

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<sup>163</sup> D.W.B. “Do You,” 684.

<sup>164</sup> D.W.B. “Do You,” 684.

General Conference Mennonite Church had less direct contact with African Americans, and that fact shows through in D.W.B.'s comment about "all my discussions with Negroes." His or her contacts with African Americans would likely be comparatively low. Additionally, a white person posing a controversial question to an African American is problematic, simply based on lived history and the power dynamics implied. Secondly, and most interestingly, this article uses some of the same arguments then being made within the Mennonite Church, and strongly foreshadows the official position that would be taken by both denomination in coming years. While the Mennonite Church would eventually unequivocally state that there was no scriptural support for opposing interracial marriage, they left open the idea that there might be other reasons for objection, such as "social implication," echoing D.W.B.'s statement "sociologists and religious leaders... ..advise against it". The stances of the Mennonite Church, and the General Conference Mennonite Church via official statements, has been discussed previously in this chapter.<sup>165</sup>

Before dealing with specific African American leaders among the Mennonites, I would like to briefly address one more program that brought white "ethnic" Mennonites and African Americans into direct contact – the Fresh Air programs in each denomination. These programs involved taking African American children from inner city areas of the north, as well as southern areas, and placing them on Mennonite farms for one to two-week vacations during the summer months. Interestingly, this program was initially spearheaded by the rather conservative Lancaster Conference of the Mennonite Church – definitely representatives of the "Mennonite Fundamentalism" camp. As Tobin M. Shearer has pointed out, this was a two-edged sword. One the one hand, it provided the children with an opportunity that most of them relished – many

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<sup>165</sup> D.W.B. "Do You," 684; Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators*, 297-298.

of the children returned summer after summer. It also helped the rather isolated Mennonites to have more direct contact with African American children, thereby challenging the host families' (and their communities') attitudes and prejudices. It even convinced *some* in Mennonite circles to actively engage in civil rights demonstrations. On the other hand, it gave Mennonites cover to say they supported civil rights, and held racially egalitarian beliefs, even as they resisted direct activism during the era.<sup>166</sup>

The two denominations each operated their own version of the Fresh Air program in slightly different ways, but with the same basic outcomes – good and bad. In the Mennonite Church, the program was operated through the conservative Lancaster Conference, and, in keeping with their more top-down style of governance, had a very structured, rule oriented approach. The children in this program were all sent to southeastern Pennsylvania, and often returned to the same communities, and even families, year after year. The General Conference Mennonite program, in keeping with their more autonomous nature, was administered in a less rigid fashion, and sent children from the south, as well as midwestern cities, to farm families in multiple areas of the Midwest. And unlike the Mennonite Church program, the children were limited to a one-time visit. This decision had the effect of allowing more children to take part and expose host families and communities to more individual children, but at the cost of longer-term relationship like those formed in Pennsylvania.<sup>167</sup>

In the end, the vast majority of Mennonites who had been involved with the Fresh Air program felt that that was enough of a contribution to the civil rights movement and eschewed any further involvement as a violation of the doctrine of nonresistance. As the 1960s drew to a

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<sup>166</sup> Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators*, 62-65.

<sup>167</sup> Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators*, 61-65, 96.

close, many, particularly in the Midwest, among the General Conference group, were losing interest in the program, while it continued to flourish in the Mennonite Church in the East. Interestingly enough, among the those moved to take further civil rights action by their experiences with Fresh Air, it was General Conference Mennonites such as Delton Franz, and Henry A. Fast. In fact, Fast became very involved, politically speaking, attending civil rights meetings in Washington D.C., and meeting with President Johnson to voice support for what would become the Civil Rights Act of 1964. While the General Conference Mennonites seemed to have members at both ends of the continuum on this issue, the Mennonite Church remained much more in the center, continuing to support the Fresh Air program, while staying away from political involvement – though there were individuals who were active. The seemingly at odds approaches taken by the denominations should come as no surprise and are a product of the cultural histories of the two groups, as well as a product of their governing structures. Dutch/Low German Mennonites, who made up a large portion of the General Conference group (both Fast and Franz were of this ancestry) had long been more willing to engage in politics. The Swiss/High German Mennonites, who predominated in the Mennonite Church, were far less likely to engage in politics. And as has proven true time and again, polity matters. In a congregationally governed group like the General Conference, it is easy to have numerous opinions, and when a majority of individuals are no longer interested, it is easy for a program to falter. In a group governed in a more episcopal fashion, where individual preference holds less sway, it easier both to hold unity in approach, and to maintain programs.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators*, 92-97; Richard D. Thiessen, "Franz, Delton Willis (1932-2006)" *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. (accessed, March 1, 2020) [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Franz,\\_Delton\\_Willis\\_\(1932-2006\)&oldid=141823](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Franz,_Delton_Willis_(1932-2006)&oldid=141823); Maynard Shelly. "Fast, Henry A. (1894-1990)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. (accessed March 1, 2020) [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Fast,\\_Henry\\_A.\\_\(1894-1990\)&oldid=169323](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Fast,_Henry_A._(1894-1990)&oldid=169323)

## Major African American Leaders Among Mennonites

Despite what amounted to a rather cool reception, some African Americans who had joined the Mennonites persisted, with some rising to prominent places of leadership. Two of the best-known examples were James Lark in the Mennonite Church, and Vincent Harding in the General Conference Mennonite Church. Lark remained a Mennonite until his death, while Harding eventually left the group. I will allow Harding to describe his spiritual journey in his own words as I explore his time among the Mennonites. These two men serve as examples of the difficulties faced by African Americans in the Mennonite fold, as well as showcasing two different approaches to the inherent racism that they saw. They were similar in some ways, and strikingly different in others.

Vincent Harding was born and raised in New York City, by a devoted mother, while Lark was orphaned at a young age, and raised in Savannah, Georgia. Both were religious in their youth, but Lark attended the relatively mainstream Baptist church, while Harding was brought up in a strict, and somewhat separatist offshoot of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Strangely enough, Lark moved from a relatively mainstream American religious group, into a more separatist Mennonite denomination (Mennonite Church) where he was encouraged, though not technically required, to wear plain clothing that clearly marked him as a Mennonite. He complied, which may or may not have had something to do with his rapid (relatively speaking) rise in leadership. Harding, on the other hand, went from a relatively separatist religious tradition into one of the more mainstream Mennonite bodies (General Conference Mennonite Church) even though his wife was a part of the more traditional Mennonite Church. While this is not to say that the General Conference Mennonite Church of the late 1950s and early 1960s was

entirely mainstream, the General Conference did not require, or even strongly encourage any style of dress that would have marked members on sight.<sup>169</sup>

Both men went to college at a times when that was not the norm for most of the nation, whatever their race. While Vincent Harding attended secular institutions – City College of New York, Columbia University, and eventually the University of Chicago, James Lark attended a Quaker institution in Pennsylvania (today Cheyene State College) though he did not become a Quaker, remaining Baptist until joining the Mennonite Church. Both men served in the US military – Lark during the First World War, and Harding during the Korean war. Harding was drawn to the Mennonite tradition through his education, first learning about Anabaptists during his doctoral work, whereas Lark was drawn in through direct contact with Mennonites in a mission church called Rocky Ridge, near the place in Pennsylvania where he lived at the time. Rocky Ridge began as a multiethnic, multiracial, outreach of the relatively conservative Lancaster Conference of the Mennonite Church. Harding was already serving as a Seventh Day Adventist pastor in the Chicago area, when he joined the Woodlawn (General Conference) Mennonite Church, where he became a member of the pastoral staff. Because of the congregational nature of the denomination, there was not as much opportunity for “upward mobility” after ordination. Lark, on the other hand, was a layman when he became a Mennonite and remained so for some time after joining the group (1935.) He and his family began to actively engage in mission work (summer Bible Schools) early on (1936) and were soon asked to do mission work in the Chicago area, which they did. Lark was ordained as a minister in 1946.

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<sup>169</sup> Bechler, *The Black Mennonite Church*, 47-54; Rachel E. Harding and Vincent Harding, “Biography, Democracy, and Spirit: An Interview with Vincent Harding” *Callaloo* Vol. 20, No. 3 (Summer 1997), 682-698, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3299395> [accessed 09/03/2020]; Tobin Miller Shearer, “A Prophet Pushed Out: Vincent Harding and the Mennonite,” *Mennonite Life* Vol. 69, 2015. (accessed 09/03/2020) <https://mla.bethelks.edu/mla-archive/2015/a-prophet-pushed-out-vincent-harding-and-the-menno.php>

Because of the episcopal nature of the Mennonite Church, there was room for Lark to advance to the office of Bishop, which he did in 1954, making him the first African American Bishop in Mennonite history. It is interesting to note that his elevation to bishop occurred at the same time the United States Supreme Court issued the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, one that would set in motion change that would have widespread impact.<sup>170</sup>

Harding and Lark shared many of the same aspirations and disappointments. Both hoped to see not only spiritual, but also social and economic gains for African Americans, and both were drawn to the practices and beliefs of Mennonites. Neither one was blind to the shortcomings of their respective denominations regarding race. Lark was often frustrated with the slow pace of change, and the tepid response of the Mennonite Church regarding racial issues, saying that the church was “falling down on the job” regarding their response to the problems of minority populations. Whether because of his position of leadership, his tone, or his willingness to continue to work within the system, Lark received far less criticism than did Harding, who had threatened to leave, well before he did. There was also a difference in focus. Harding felt that political activism would be necessary to make the changes needed, and was unafraid to take part in protests, whereas Lark, certainly not blind to the social ills faced by African Americans, remained more focused on church planting, and ministering spiritually and materially *through* the church. He remained aloof from political protest, and the censure that such activities brought Harding. Although Lark and his wife did plant one church (the process of starting a new congregation) in California that was not officially Mennonite, that was more a matter of

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<sup>170</sup> Bechler, *The Black Mennonite Church*, 47-54; Shearer, “A Prophet”; Steiner, Samuel J. “Rocky Ridge Mennonite Church (Quakertown, Pennsylvania, USA).” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. (accessed, September 12, 2020) [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Rocky\\_Ridge\\_Mennonite\\_Church\\_\(Quakertown,\\_Pennsylvania,\\_USA\)&oldid=168894](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Rocky_Ridge_Mennonite_Church_(Quakertown,_Pennsylvania,_USA)&oldid=168894)

logistical practicality than a renouncing of Mennonite affiliation, and he did other work after that plant explicitly as a Mennonite Church leader, remaining in good standing with the denomination at the time of his death in 1978, just short of his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Harding on the other hand, eventually left from the General Conference Mennonite Church.<sup>171</sup>

The generational gap, as well as differences in upbringing, may also help to explain their differing approaches and responses. Lark was more than forty years Harding's senior, making him a septuagenarian when the civil rights movement began in earnest, whereas Harding was in his early 30s. And while New York was certainly no paradise for African Americans, Harding has characterized his early education as positive and multicultural. Savannah of the 1890s was not the New York City of the 1930s – Lark watched one of his uncles being lynched by an angry white mob. Then too, Harding's activism and ministry were predominately in his non-native South, while none of Lark's ministry was in the South of his birth.<sup>172</sup>

Not the prolific writer that Harding was, and with a much lower profile, Lark is the more mysterious of the two leaders. Although there are anecdotal accounts of his irritation with racism in the church, he did not create a large body of written work, and as such, we do not have the resultant responses from white church members in the way we do with Harding. Perhaps the best way to understand the relationship between Lark and the Mennonite Church is to analyze the ways the denomination chose to eulogize him and his wife at the time of their deaths.

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<sup>171</sup> Bechler, *The Black Mennonite Church*, 51; James C. Juhnke, "Harding, Vincent Gordon (1931-2014)" *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. (accessed September 3, 2020) [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Harding,\\_Vincent\\_Gordon\\_\(1931-2014\)&oldid=161341](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Harding,_Vincent_Gordon_(1931-2014)&oldid=161341); "James A. Lark Leaves a Church Planting Legacy" *The Gospel Herald* Vol 71, No. 6, February 1978. (accessed May 20, 2020) <https://archive.org/details/gospelherald197871unse/page/118/mode/1up/search/james+lark>

<sup>172</sup> Bechler, *The Black Mennonite Church*, 49; Shearer, "A Prophet"



Rowena Clark, wife of Bishop James Lark passed away in March of 1970. That May, *The Gospel Herald* feature a memorial piece about her life that took up over a page. Despite its large print headline and relative long length, it provided scant biographical information. The opening two sentence paragraph is as follows:

*Ed. note* – On March 5, 1970, Rowena (Mrs. James Lark) Lark of Fresno, Calif., passed away following a heart attack at the age of 77. Born in Savannah, Ga., Mrs. Lark was widely known for her musical abilities and together with her husband helped to pioneer black urban ministries in the Mennonite Church.<sup>173</sup>

One might expect that details such as her family of origin, information about how she came to be a Mennonite, details about her marriage to James, information about her children, etc., would follow. That, however, is not the case. Following this rather thin bit of biography, the editor's note continues with another two-sentence paragraph introducing LeRoy and Irene Belcher, who wrote the rest of the article, describing them as "close associates" of the Lark family. The last sentence reads: "In the following article, the Bechlers tell what Mrs. Lark's life and passing has meant to them personally."<sup>174</sup>

LeRoy Bechler begins with a section entitled "An Urban Pioneer." He starts by rehearsing the fact that the Mennonite church had first protested slavery in 1688 – a common talking point among Mennonites seeking to defend their record on race relations, but then allows that the next 200 years saw little attempt to embrace African Americans. That is where James and Rowena Clark are introduced as having "enlarged the vision of the church" and as a couple who "encouraged its growing involvement in the nation's urban areas." They are described as pioneers who opened new territory. Mr. Bechler goes on to explain how he met the couple in

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<sup>173</sup> Leroy Bechler and Irene Bechler, "Remembering Rowena Clark" *The Gospel Herald* Vol. 63 No. 19, May 12, 1970, 426-427.

<sup>174</sup> Bechler and Bechler, "Remembering," 426.

1946. As a young man, he was working as part of a church mission program in Chicago under the direction of James Lark. He discusses the patience and love shown to the mission workers (presumably white) by the Larks and credits his decision to spend his life working in urban areas to them. “Their unceasing concern that the Mennonite Church... .. share its resources and personnel with a people largely excluded from mainstream society made an indelible impression...”<sup>175</sup>

Bechler then takes a few paragraphs to discuss Rowena Clark specifically. They are complementary but provide a rather general overview of his impression of her life, characterizing her as a leader, and devoted wife who “shared the visions of her husband.” He makes specific mention of her creation of illustrated lessons (presumably for children) but also says she was a leader to “adults alike.” He also talks about her memory for scripture, and her song leading abilities. He closes his section praising her sacrificial service and calling on the church to continue in the same manner.<sup>176</sup>

At this point, Mrs. Belcher takes over with a section entitled “A Contagious Love for Jesus.” The next several paragraphs provide vignettes of Mrs. Lark over several decades, from the memories of Belcher. Each one deals with Lark leading music. Mrs. Belcher concludes with the following:

This “Mother in Israel” has left me with many wonderful memories. I shall remember her love for God’s Word and her concern for people, especially children. Music was often the tool she used to bring the two together... ..Thank you, dear Lord, for Sister Rowena Lark’s ministry to my life.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Bechler and Bechler, “Remembering,” 426.

<sup>176</sup> Bechler and Bechler, “Remembering,” 426.

<sup>177</sup> Bechler and Bechler, “Remembering,” 426-427.

While the article is complementary of Mrs. Lark, it is, in many ways about the Bechlers more than it is about Rowena Clark. One finishes the piece with very little information about the woman herself. If she was a pioneer in the Mennonite world, as they claim, and indeed she was, why did they say so little about her? How did an African American woman from southern Georgia come to be a part of the Mennonite Church? How did she and her husband come to direct mission efforts in the inner city of Chicago? Was this church sponsored, or an individual initiative? Why was she living in Fresno – was California a part of their mission work? As the Belchers worked closely with the Larks, it can be assumed that they knew the answers to these questions, but it seems odd that none of this information would have been shared in such a memorial piece. Being in the *Gospel Herald*, this was obviously meant for a readership larger than those few Mennonites intimately acquainted with urban ministries.

While I do not mean to directly impugn the motives of the Bechlers, or the editors of the *Gospel Herald*, I cannot help but see this as an example of the type of implicit, if unintentional, racism that Vincent Harding railed against. It strikes me as a bit paternalistic, with the Larks acting as merely one-dimensional set pieces in the Mennonite story. This piece presents the Larks as merely a vehicle for “enlightening” and “inspiring” white Mennonites. The Larks could be trotted out at just the right moment to help “ethnic” Mennonites self-actualize, without having any independent stories of their own – stories that might not fit into the neatly crafted narrative of race relations in the Mennonite Church. They seem to be part of the “Magical African American Friend” trope that Tobin Shearer describes thusly: “an African-American character plays a salvific role in the life of a White person”.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Tobin Miller Shearer, “Mennonites and the Magical African American Friend” in blog *Anabaptist Historian: Bringing the Anabaptist Past into a Digital Century* Posted April 10, 2019. (accessed, September 3, 2020) <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2019/04/10/mennonites-and-the-magical-african-american-friend/>

When James Lark died 8 years later, the *Gospel Herald* ran a piece on him as well. Though no author was listed, Leroy Bechler was quoted. This time the article is listed in the *Church News Section* of the publication and is on the same page as another obituary – that of J.B. Garber, a white “ethnic” Mennonite. Garber’s obituary is headlined in larger type, and is three times longer than Lark’s, though it lacks a photograph, which James Lark’s piece does include. Though far shorter, and much less flowery than the article written for his wife, it provides more factual information about his life.<sup>179</sup>

In addition to his place and date of birth, (Savannah, Georgia, 1888) it includes his 1918 marriage to Rowena. While it does not go into his education, or explain his move north, it does provide some information about how he and his wife became Mennonites, explaining that they began attending the Rocky Ridge Mennonite Church in Quakertown, Pennsylvania. It briefly discusses his 1940s ordination as a minister, and his 1954 elevation to bishop – a first in the history of the Mennonite Church. It also lists eleven churches or mission outreaches he was involved in, in six states in the Midwest and west. One at least comes away with a sense of the breadth and scope of his over 30 years in ministry. The article closes with the following line taken from his funeral:

“Before us lies history,” said LeRoy Bechler, pastor of Inglewood Mennonite Church in Los Angeles, “for Reverend Lark was a man who was 50 years ahead of his time in vision and concern for the growth of the Mennonite Church in the urban areas of our nation.”<sup>180</sup>

A comparison to the Graber obituary on the same page provides some interesting contrasts. While Lark’s educational attainment is not mentioned, Graber’s educational

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<sup>179</sup> “James H. Lark,” 118.

<sup>180</sup> “James H. Lark,” 118.

background receives considerable treatment. Lark's marriage to Rowena is mentioned, but Graber's family life again receives much more coverage, including the occupations, spouses, and locations of his children, while no mention is made of the Lark children. In comparing the two, one comes away with a fuller chronology of the life of J.D. Graber. The argument could be made that Graber received a lengthier treatment because he held leadership positions in a number of denominational agencies, beyond just being a bishop. The fact that for a time he was a regular contributor to *The Gospel Herald* may also factor into the relative length of the article. Then, too, he was a bit younger than Lark, who had been ill for a number of years – perhaps he was more active in Mennonite circles at the time of his death. It is likely that more people would have been familiar with Graber's ministry. Additionally, there may have been editorial constraints as to length – but that is a universal concern, and people do not make such decisions in a vacuum. Given the stark difference in the length of the articles, I find the inclusion of a photo for Lark and not Graber telling. Perhaps the “otherness” of an African American in Mennonite circles would illicit more curiosity, necessitating a photo in a way that an “ethnic” Mennonite would not.

This article was in some ways an improvement over the tribute to Lark's wife from earlier in the decade. It provides more concrete information, and there is less of a sense of him serving as a “Magical African American Friend” who helped white Mennonites to become better. Bechler, at least in the quote provided, seems to place his work under the banner of “urban ministry.” While this is not wrong, per se, it seems to put less emphasis on Lark's outreach to African Americans, though it does recognize him as the Mennonites' first African American bishop. Lark seems to be presented in a bit more rounded way, and as someone with a life and work that did not hinge entirely on his relationship with whites. Perhaps the late 1970s was far

enough removed from the tension of the late 1960s, that Mennonites felt less need to defend their history on race relations. Perhaps some real growth had occurred. It is hard to correctly attribute motive. At any rate, aside from the possible inclusion of the photo, James Lark is presented as less of a prop, and more of a person, than had been his wife a few years earlier – though clearly with less emphasis than that given to his white counterpart, with whom he shared the page.

One can clearly see the challenges posed by social action in service of achieving racial equality in not only Mennonite circles, but also in society at large, by a closer examination of Vincent Harding and his eventual departure from the Mennonites. When compared to Lark, Harding clearly had the more complicated and confrontational relationship with Mennonites. Additionally, he left a much more abundant record of his views. I would like to explore his journey into the Mennonite faith a bit further and examine the activism that drew him censure from the church, as well as some of the specific responses made to Harding from within Mennonite circles. While Harding was raised in a nonconformist church, it was not one that necessarily eschewed military service, and Harding served in the military during the Korean conflict, though not in Korea. Already in possession of a bachelor's degree in history and a master's degree in journalism, upon leaving the military, he pursued a doctoral degree at the University of Chicago while pastoring a small Seventh-Day Adventist church – a branch of the denomination in which he had grown up. Even while in the military, Harding had begun to question the rightness of such service – this early questioning would make him open to the peace message of the Mennonites when he first discovered them while studying Anabaptists. His interest piqued, he began attending an integrated Mennonite congregation in Chicago, where he met his future wife, Rosemarie Freaney. Thus began Harding's relationship with the Mennonites

– one birthed of intellectual curiosity, and nurtured by his growing relationship with Freaney, who also happened to be African American.<sup>181</sup>

Between the draw of Rosemarie, and what he viewed as the success of Mennonites in living out their creed, Harding soon became a Mennonite, joining the General Conference Mennonite Church, and became the associate pastor of the Woodlawn Mennonite Church in Chicago. Initially white Mennonites were thrilled with him, some calling him a “modern prophet sent to awaken the church.” Not all parts of the church wished to be awakened, however. After preaching a sermon in an all-white Mennonite congregation, many of the members became so angry that some threatened to leave if an African American ever set foot in their church again.<sup>182</sup>

Harding was not one to pull punches, either in his sermons or in his writing. He called out fellow Mennonites when he sensed hypocrisy. In one case, he pointed out that Mennonites had actively used political methods in attempting to secure exemption from active military service, and then later used the excuse that they did not engage in politics as a reason for not taking a more vigorous stand against racial discrimination. In another case, he complained that Mennonites were nonconformist in name only when it came to civil rights issues, and he pointed out the absurdity of denominational statements against things such as playing cards or pool, coupled with their silence on issues of racism. He went so far as to call the church to reject an opium gospel of salvation that did not also address racial injustice. This was clearly a reference to Marx, though of course he was not suggesting, as Marx had, that atheism was the answer. Nevertheless, these types of statements would give at least fleeting credibility to the position taken by some Mennonites that the civil rights movement was part of a subversive communist

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<sup>181</sup> Shearer, “A Prophet.”

<sup>182</sup> Shearer, “A Prophet.”

plot. Though controversial, the denomination stood by Harding, even as many individual members did not.<sup>183</sup>

In 1959, five Mennonites, including Harding, traveled through the South, meeting such leaders as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Daisy Bates, a leader in the integration of Central High School in Little Rock. Delton Franz, a white co-pastor with Harding at Woodlawn, was among the five, and he wrote about the trip, and encouraged Mennonites, via their press, to take an active role in the movement. This trip seemed to strengthen Harding's resolve as well. At one point he told other Mennonite leaders their help was needed, using a quote from an unnamed source obtained on that 1959 trip: "We'd be tickled to have you Mennonites come down here and teach us a few things; you're the folks who know all about this."<sup>184</sup> Sadly many Mennonite were not interested in assisting with the civil rights movement.

In 1961, Harding, and his recently wedded wife Rosemarie, moved to Atlanta to start Mennonite House under the auspices of the Mennonite Central Committee. Their goal was racial reconciliation. Not only did the Hardings place Mennonite volunteer workers who came south to help, they also actively assisted Martin Luther King, Jr. in the work of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, traveling to places such as Albany, Georgia, and Birmingham, Alabama. Much about the Mennonite doctrine of peace and reconciliation dovetailed with the agenda of the civil rights movement and King's insistence on nonviolence. And the Hardings were not King's only connection to Mennonites, though certainly the strongest. Martin Luther King, Jr., had accepted speaking engagements at both Bethel College in Kansas (a General Conference

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<sup>183</sup> Shearer, "A Prophet"; Vincent Harding, *The Task of the Mennonite Church in Establishing Racial Unity*, p. 29, File 60/1, Box 60, Hist. Mss. 1-48, John H. Yoder (1927-1997) Collection, Race/Urban Issues, Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen, IN.

<sup>184</sup> Shearer, "A Prophet,"; Guy F. Hershberger, Report of the Chicago Race Relations Seminar, July 16, 1959, Folder 58, Box 7, CESR papers 1-3-7, Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen, IN.)



Mennonite school) and Goshen College (a school affiliated with the Mennonite Church) prior to the arrival of the Hardings in Atlanta, and used those opportunities to reach out to both denominations for assistance.<sup>185</sup>

Within a year of their arrival in Georgia, the Hardings' activities began to create tension within Mennonite circles. The administrator of the MCC's Peace Section had written a number of reports explaining that the Hardings' primary focus with SCLC and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was pastoral in nature, hoping that that would pacify those critical of King's groups, and would give cover if accused of endorsing the SCLC and SNCC, but Harding's increasing involvement with King and civil disobedience made that position increasingly difficult to defend. When Harding was arrested for praying on the steps of city hall in Albany, Georgia, his immediate MCC supervisor had supported him by providing bail, but other church leaders were less supportive, and encouraged greater caution. Rather than avoid a topic he knew to be controversial, Harding continued to discuss his arrest at length as he encouraged Mennonites to become active in the movement, and increasingly criticized the overall Mennonite response, while becoming ever more active himself. He was engaged in protest activities in Mississippi and Alabama, present in Birmingham in the wake the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, and in a meeting with John F. Kennedy and other religious leaders to discuss issues of race, where he officially represented both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Shearer, "A Prophet."

<sup>186</sup> Shearer, "A Prophet"; Bender, Harold S. and Elmer Neufeld. "Mennonite Central Committee (International)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. (accessed May 21, 2020). [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite\\_Central\\_Committee\\_\(International\)&oldid=145869](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite_Central_Committee_(International)&oldid=145869)

By becoming more active, Harding highlighted the increasing division in Mennonite circles on the issue. Some supported more robust Mennonite involvement in the growing civil rights demonstrations, but many others did not. For example, incensed at the activism of the Hardings, and their work at Mennonite House, a new Mennonite ministry was begun in Atlanta, called Mennonite Fellowship. This rival organization was opposed to activism and declared that the church overlooked race. Mennonite Fellowship in Atlanta was led by a man from the conservative Lancaster Conference of the Mennonite Church. It must be remembered that the Mennonite Central Committee, under whose auspices the Hardings worked, was made up of and supported by multiple Mennonite denominations. This was indicative of the debate over activism (peacemaking) and nonresistance – another example of the divide between more conservative/fundamentalist branches of the church, and those more liberal branches that favored a more active style of engagement. This same division surfacing over the civil rights issue would also be on display regarding the Vietnam conflict, which will be addressed in the next chapter.<sup>187</sup>

Indeed, this division was indicative of the breach between “Mennonite Fundamentalism,” American fundamentalism in Mennonite circles, and more “liberal” Mennonites who favored the Anabaptist Vision – though perhaps not in ways Bender had envisioned when he first coined the term in the mid-1940s. In the debate over the civil rights movement, Mennonite Fellowship stands as an example of “Mennonite Fundamentalism” – conservative mainstream fundamentalism with strong overlays of traditional Mennonite trappings such as strict dress standards, separation from “worldly amusements,” etc. The conservative Lancaster Conference, from which Mennonite Fellowship originated, was heavily engaged in Fresh Air and other

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<sup>187</sup> Shearer, “A Prophet.”

outreaches such as their work in Atlanta, but strongly opposed to active protest, as it violated their understanding of nonresistance. Though supporting the ideas of equality (at least as they conceived of it), they viewed the methods of Martin Luther King, Jr. as coercive. American fundamentalism was the second stream. These Mennonites had been influenced by rightwing religious broadcasting, and viewed the civil rights movement as subversive, and perhaps a tool of communism, sometimes saying so explicitly. It is no surprise that fears of communism would surface in connection with the civil rights movement. For those wishing to link the two, one could easily point to earlier activism – W.E.B. DuBois, and his speaking tours of the Soviet Union were well known. Sadly, this more mainstream flavor of fundamentalism, partially refueled by the fear of communism, had made inroads not only in the Mennonite Church, but especially in the General Conference Mennonite Church. Indeed, many in the General Conference group were only a couple of generations removed from Russia and were well aware of the plight of their friends and relatives at the hands of the Bolsheviks, which must also have influenced such thinking. The Anabaptist Vision followers made up the third stream, and they viewed active, nonviolent protest as their duty as disciples of Christ. Some of these same separate strains of Mennonite thought would remain to cause dissension in the merged Mennonite Church USA in the early twenty-first century.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Ervin R. Stutzman, *From Nonresistance to Justice: The Transformation of Mennonite Church Peace Rhetoric, 1908-2008* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2011), 132-134, 179. Stutzman shows that as mainstream media became more accepted in Mennonite Church circles, members of the church were heavily influenced by rightwing religious leaders and their patriotism and fear of communism, so much so that the denomination had to issue an official statement on their position on communism – a statement that said there were means beyond which a Christian could not go in opposing communism. They went to great lengths to justify their position, in conjunction with the General Conference Mennonite Church. The fact that so much time and energy was spent on such a statement indicates that the rightwing inspired fear of communism, again, often hand in hand with other aspects of fundamentalism, had made great inroads into the Mennonite Church, particularly the more acculturated who had less opposition to military action. These same influences were present in the General Conference Mennonite Church, perhaps to an even greater degree.; Theiszen interview; Theron F. Schlabach, *War, Peace, and Social Conscience: Guy F. Hershberger and Mennonite Ethics* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2009,) 424-425, 462-463.

It was not only the debate over Mennonite activism that was creating problems for the Hardings. Racism within Mennonite circles was also coming to the surface amid the growing movement for equal rights. A prime example surrounded the increasing attention given to interracial marriage in Mennonite circles. Harding's support for interracial marriage brought out vigorous opposition, with antiquated arguments about "natural law" and "concern" for the offspring of mixed-race unions being made – such as have already been discussed, exposing prejudice among some white Mennonites that had heretofore been mostly voiced in the hypothetical. With Harding's insistence on the matter, it became somewhat less theoretical and more immediate. Harding's prestige in Mennonite circles seemed to have perceptibly risen after he married an African American woman, (1959) thereby rendering him "safe." In addition to friction over interracial marriage, Harding's increasing criticism of white southern Mennonites making use of what would come to be called white privilege drew nasty responses, characterizing Harding's approach as "showy" and "flamboyant," in contrast to the "humble" approach appropriate for a Mennonite minister. This showcases not simply differences of opinion regarding approach but clearly played into racist stereotypes of African American ministers. As the divide among Mennonites became more obvious, so too did Harding's growing dissatisfaction with the group.<sup>189</sup>

During a meeting in December of 1963 that included leaders from the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church to discuss racial issues, Harding became so angry at what he considered the trivial ideas presented by those present to questions of racial justice, he gave a lengthy speech calling them to task for their lack of concern, going so far as to say he was tempted to leave the church, resulting in what to him was an exasperating example of what he

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<sup>189</sup> Shearer, "A Prophet"; Juhnke, "Harding."

had just criticized. Immediately following his remarks, someone questioned him as to his opinion on some minor proposal mentioned earlier by one of the white participants. As he would later confide to a bishop in the Mennonite Church after an argument, the fact that so few would actively engage with him in face-to-face debate (as this particular bishop had) made him feel like an outsider. He did not immediately sever ties with Mennonites after the 1963 meeting, but the direction was set. Harding led one more Mennonite conference on race relations, with a similarly unsatisfying lack of progress. Hereafter he actively worked with SNCC in preparation for Freedom Summer without reference to his position in the General Conference Mennonite Church. In 1965 he resigned his post with the MCC, remaining in Atlanta taking a position at Spelman College.<sup>190</sup>

Harding continued to write for the Mennonite press periodically, but even in these articles, racial justice was the main focus, not Mennonite participation therein, and as he drew further away, some in the Mennonite world sought to pull him back, inviting him to speak at the Mennonite World Conference in 1967, an invitation he accepted. In his speech there he once again called out Mennonites for their inactivity. Some in the Mennonite press continued to criticize what they considered a politicized approach, but he also received a great deal of praise. At any rate, he had already parted ways in his own mind. He was increasingly concerned with the Vietnam War, drafting Martin Luther King, Jr.'s antiwar speech that same year. He went on to become director of the Institute of the Black World, an African American think tank, and was listed as a proposed member of the steering committee which would eventually create the Black

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<sup>190</sup> Shearer, "A Prophet."

Manifesto, demanding reparations from white religious groups. Harding continued to maintain some contact with Mennonites for several years, but he had moved on.<sup>191</sup>

Harding's growing displeasure with Mennonites and their overall response to the Civil Rights Movement can be seen in a 1967 article that he penned on Black Power in *The Mennonite*, and the responses it drew from readers show that many Mennonites were growing irritated with Harding. In the article entitled "Do We Have an Answer for Black Power?" Harding lists a litany of problems facing African Americans, including a growing wealth gap, increasing segregation, and deteriorating schools. Freely admitting that he has friends in the Black Power Movement, he explains how he answers their questions about why he associated himself with Mennonites. The questions he poses reveal a less than flattering portrayal of the group. In discussing his family of origin, and youth he asks the following: "The Mennonites, many of them, would have called your family lazy, shiftless, and without initiative."<sup>192</sup> He follows with what he considers a standard Black Power assessment of the Mennonites:

They are a proud people, those Mennonites. They are proud of their background, proud of their status, proud of their reputation for humility, proud of their independence, proud that they don't need anybody to help them. They are proud, Vincent, and because they are proud they can't feel. Pride is a great iron shell around them. It is like a great wall between us and them. They can't understand why somebody else might need help all his life, because they never needed any.<sup>193</sup>

It was a sharp critique indeed, but also a detailed and insightful testimonial of someone with a lengthy personal experience in Mennonite circles. For example, being proud of their humility was a barb especially poignant to Mennonites, given their historic commitment to

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<sup>191</sup> Shearer, "A Prophet."

<sup>192</sup> Vincent Harding, "Do We Have an Answer for Black Power?" *The Mennonite* Vol. 82. No. 6, February 7, 1967, 82-83.

<sup>193</sup> Harding, "Do We," 82.

humility. Harding goes on to characterize the slowness of Mennonites to respond to such issues as police brutality, as one of “one of these days,” and “with patience.” Again, this characterization obviously comes from the perspective of someone familiar with the debates within Mennonite circles. He also calls into question how deeply felt the Mennonite commitment to oneness in Christ goes.

You go to the Mennonites, and they say “brothers.” But they still say “your people,” Vincent, because they know that you and they are not really brothers. They still say “Your people – how do your people feel, Brother Harding?” ... Do they really consider you “brother” if they are still talking about “your people?” You need to break with them because they are not for real.<sup>194</sup>

An outsider would hardly know how Harding and the Mennonites would interact. He is almost certainly thinking of exchanges he had experienced with white “ethnic” Mennonites. Harding is using a very effective method to drive home to Mennonites the ways in which they exhibit (sometimes) unconscious racial bias. Racism was, and in some places, still is a fact of Mennonite life. That cannot be denied. The way Harding’s marriage to Rosemarie was viewed through the lens of race, and the comments about “your people” are clear proof that he dealt with real racism. I would, however, argue that there is more going on here than just racism. Harding had been a Mennonite for about a decade at this point. Even among the more acculturated General Conference group, it is often difficult for new people to break in. This quote also shows that leaving the Mennonites was something that had crossed his mind well before his actual departure.<sup>195</sup>

Harding then explains to the “questioners” why he was drawn to the Anabaptists:

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<sup>194</sup> Harding, “Do We,” 82.

<sup>195</sup> Arlee Johnson interview; Harding, “Do We,” 82.

Then I try to talk to them about the Anabaptist vision. And I try to tell them what caught me when I first read about the Anabaptists and the tremendous heroism of this persecuted and suffering group. And I tell them about the story that came out of Basel and Zurich and the Netherlands. And I tell them that these were the things that drew me to the church. They drew me to seek some way of encompassing and living out the Anabaptist vision in the midst of a suffering and hopeless world.<sup>196</sup>

It is as if he is trying to make his Mennonite readers view the current suffering of African Americans in light of their own past suffering.

Harding's would-be questioners, clearly voicing the questions that *he* was asking himself, were not convinced by his previous line of answers:

We understand that, but if these Mennonites really believe in discipleship, aren't they supposed to follow Christ wherever he leads, whatever the cost? Aren't they supposed to be ready to give up all they have to follow Christ? Show us a few who are ready to follow Christ among us, among the poor, the dispossessed, the weak, and exploited. Show us a few of your Mennonite friends who are Anabaptists.

The questions continue calling out the inconsistencies between Anabaptist ideals and current Mennonite practices:

I thought those Anabaptists were ready to break with the past. I thought that the thing that really struck the world about the Anabaptists was that they were ready to say no to everything in the past, including the church, so that they could say yes to Jesus Christ and the suffering people of the world. Are there any like that Vince?<sup>197</sup>

For those Mennonite readers who stayed with him to end of the article hoping for him to say "yes, there are," they were sadly disappointed. The final lines do not end on an especially hopeful note. "Are any of them going to join the fight, Vince? Where do they stand? Vince? Where do they stand?" It is clear that Harding does not have an answer, at least not an answer

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<sup>196</sup> Harding, "Do We," 82.

<sup>197</sup> Harding, "Do We," 83.



they want to hear. Perhaps it is hindsight, knowing that the parting is coming, but this piece feels like a last-ditch effort to convince Mennonites to act, before washing his hands of the group. He seemed to be answering the title question, “Do we have an answer for Black Power?” with a sad “no, we do not.”<sup>198</sup>

Harding’s rather pointed calling out of Mennonite hypocrisy apparently struck a nerve and drew responses from ethnic Mennonites in the form of “Letters to the Editor.” Just two weeks later, in the February 28 edition of *The Mennonite*, the same publication where the Harding piece had earlier appeared, a respondent replied in a fairly conciliatory manner. “I would like to say ‘thank you’ to Vincent Harding, both for his article... .. and his patience with us.” The letter contains an acknowledgement of the critiques offered by Harding, an apology, and also a plea for him to persist in the Mennonite fold.

I’m afraid that we middle-class, ethnic, white Mennonites too often don’t even want to understand the conditions of the less fortunate. It is much easier to give a few spare dollars and then expect someone else to put ‘our’ Anabaptist theology into action. Vincent, please try “sticking it out” with us. We need people with a different racial and cultural background to help us regain the Anabaptist vision.<sup>199</sup>

While whether or not the author – Ivan Unger – is continuing the “us” and “them” dichotomy is debatable, it is clear that he is willing to accept the criticism leveled at Mennonites in the original article. Oddly enough, the respondent lists a Saskatchewan address. Strange that the first published response to the Harding piece on Black Power was from a Canadian instead of someone from the United States. Or, given all Harding had to say, perhaps not.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Harding, “Do We,” 83.

<sup>199</sup> Ivan R. Unger, “Regaining Anabaptist Vision” *The Mennonite* Vol. 82, no. 9, February 28, 1967, 156.

<sup>200</sup> Unger, “Regaining,” 156.

The March 7 issue of *The Mennonite* drew another, much longer, response in the Letters section, and this time from a Mennonite in the United States. While this letter ends with the same basic premise – Harding is needed and should stay with the group – the author of this letter takes a much different approach than had Unger. Richard Schroeder’s response is striking, not only for its tone, but also the way he structures his argument. His letter has much more of an edge to it. His irritation is clear, and he takes a sometimes-accusatory tone toward Harding. And not only that, he takes the same structural format employed by Harding – a question and answer style explanation of his position.<sup>201</sup>

The ire is clear immediately. In direct response to Harding’s mention of friends in the Black Power movement who did not understand his alliance with Mennonites, Schroeder opens with the following: “I’ve got friends, too. And my friends are on both sides of some kind of fence. My friends are asking me questions, too, Vince.” The use of a Harding’s nickname from the very start of the article shows a total lack of respect and continues an old tradition of refusing to acknowledge the age, achievements, titles, or even names of African Americans. Harding was an ordained minister, a college professor with a PhD, and in his mid-30s at this time. By his own admission, Schroeder is just a “kid.” By calling him “Vince,” instead of Reverend Harding, Professor Harding, Dr. Harding, Mr. Harding, Vincent Harding, Harding, or even Vincent, the author confirms some of the racism that Harding was railing against.<sup>202</sup>

It becomes clear from the context, that Schroeder is involved in some type of urban social work, and clearly felt that Harding did not appreciate the efforts that he, as a white Mennonite, was putting forth. He was working in Oklahoma City, apparently as a means of alternative

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<sup>201</sup> Richard Schroeder, “Reply to Vincent Harding” *The Mennonite* Vol. 82, No. 10, March 7, 1967, 171-172.

<sup>202</sup> Schroeder, “Reply,” 171.

service during the Vietnam conflict. While he did not explicitly state that he was working with African Americans, he implies that to be the case – “because my skin is lighter than there’s.[sic]” It is possible that he was working with African Americans, but this could also mean he was working with Mexican Americans. It would seem that if he was indeed working with African Americans, he would have made that claim in a more explicit fashion, if for no other reason than to bolster his arguments.<sup>203</sup>

Schroeder mimics Harding’s line of questioning from Black Power supporters about how Mennonites would have viewed Harding’s background and why he would affiliate with them, by turning the tables and having Mennonites question how urban people would view Schroeder’s background, and why he would choose to work in areas of urban poverty:

Some of my friends are saying “Dick, you don’t belong there in the city, especially not in the slums. After all, you grew up on a farm, Dick. What do you know about social work? What do you know about the war on poverty and ignorance? What do you know about helping people with their economic, social, and political problems... ..why can’t you come home and start thinking about a permanent home for your family? After all, you could get a good job, if you really wanted one, you know. We know you mean well, Dick but we’re a peaceful people. We’ve got so many problems in our own churches.”<sup>204</sup>

Schroeder’s words open a proverbial “can of worms.” On the one hand, he is answering the question from Harding’s original article as to whether or not there are any truly Anabaptist Mennonites answering Christ’s call to minister to the oppressed with a resounding yes. It is as if he is saying “Yes, I am a true Anabaptist Mennonite – we do exist, and, yes, I am ministering in just such situations.” At the same time, in his haste to follow Harding’s format of questions, and by providing the mirror image questions from a Mennonite perspective, he inadvertently acknowledges that such Mennonites are indeed few and far between. Were that not the case,

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<sup>203</sup> Schroeder, “Reply,” 171.

<sup>204</sup> Schroeder, “Reply,” 171.

why then would they not have encouraged him in his work, as opposed to urging him to stop? The onus was on Mennonites to prove that they lived up to their creed, and by following the questioning format of Harding, Schroeder shows that while there are a few, they are the exception, rather than the rule. His determination to match Harding's style inadvertently proves Harding's point. This was perhaps an understandable error on Schroeder's part, given his anger, but the result was making the basic truth of Harding point of view manifest from the very lips, or pen, as it were, of an "ethnic" Mennonite.<sup>205</sup>

Having voiced some of his frustrations, Schroeder goes on to accept some of Harding's criticisms, and agrees to take some personal responsibility as to making sure the Anabaptist message is made know. He argues that his tradition does indeed have something to offer the movement:

I am not ashamed of my heritage – Mennonite, Anabaptist, Christian, as you say. We have something to say to a world that is every bit as mixed-up as I sometimes am. If we don't then maybe we ought to close up shop. But I think we do. And I realize that the ball is already partly mine to carry. We have made mistakes; but it's now partly up to me to make sure that we really know what our message is.<sup>206</sup>

Though his take is far more strident than Unger's, Schroeder ends with a plea for Harding to remain, arguing that both sides needed each other. "Maybe you can understand why your friends say what they do, and why my friends say what they do... ...And then you can help me... ... understand how I ought to be helping..." He closes with the line "We need you, Vince!"<sup>207</sup>

Both of these responses indicate that at least some white Mennonites understood the deficiencies in their response to issues of civil rights, and acknowledged the critique leveled by

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<sup>205</sup> Schroeder, "Reply," 171.

<sup>206</sup> Schroeder, "Reply," 171-172.

<sup>207</sup> Schroeder, "Reply," 172.

Harding against the groups. While their level of defensiveness varied, both at least argued for better responses, and indicated that they wanted Harding to remain with the group. Although these responses indicated a willingness to engage, they each in their own way recognized that this was not the position of rank-and-file members of the group, which would by and large indicate that the answer to Harding's question, about whether or not such Mennonite existed, was no – at least not very many of them.

While the larger part of the Mennonite community did not take part in overt civil rights demonstration, which often proved to be dangerous for the demonstrators, there were individuals who did take such risks. Harding, not one given to intellectual dishonesty, recounted one such individual in a 1997 interview about his life:

...we drove to Mississippi to meet with a white Mennonite pastor [Titus Bender] who wanted to get more involved in the work of reconciliation... We agreed to meet at a service station outside of town... ..when he saw us, he got out of his car. All kinds of white guys were sitting around the service station observing... ..in those days... ..when you meet somebody from the community, from the church, you actually embraced them, and kissed check to check. Titus did this in the midst of Meridian, Mississippi... That kind of risk-taking for what people really believed in was the kind of thing that really kept us going.<sup>208</sup>

Guy F. Hershberger, a Mennonite professor and ethicist, and the author of *The Way of the Cross in Human Relations*, was a leader among white “ethnic” Mennonites in advocating for civil rights. Although best known among Mennonites as a peace advocate, he was actively engaged in the movement to protest segregation. In the late 1950s, he led an integrated group into a segregated restaurant in the Atlanta airport, where they successfully engaged in an act of civil disobedience. His African American companions were told they could eat, but they would have to do so behind a screen, hiding them from the view of the other diners. They refused. The

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<sup>208</sup> Harding and Harding, “Democracy and Spirit,” 696.

restaurant then compromised and said the African American members of the group could sit at the table with Hershberger and his white companions, but they would not be served, and they were not provided with plates, glasses, or flatware, as the whites were. The whites ordered three large meals, and the group of five men proceeded to share the available cutlery as best they could. Eventually, additional table service was brought to the two African Americans in the party, and the meal proceeded without incident, with the group providing a large tip before leaving. Perhaps Hershberger's appearance – the “plain coat” favored by the Mennonite Church looked very much like what a priest might wear – prevented reprisal. At any rate, Hershberger refused to let the incident drop, writing letters of protest to the restaurant chain, the Atlanta airport, airlines that used the Atlanta airport, and the Atlanta Constitution newspaper. Clearly, Hershberger was a member of the “Anabaptist Vision” camp. Such activities were criticized by both the “Mennonite Fundamentalists” as too coercive, as well as more acculturated Mennonites who had been accepted more mainstream American fundamentalism.<sup>209</sup>

Lawrence Burkholder, a Mennonite who was on the faculty of the Harvard Divinity School took part in an integration effort in Saint Augustine, Florida, on March 31, 1964. Burkholder, along with the mother of the governor of Massachusetts, and the wife of the dean of the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, travelled to Saint Augustine, where they met with six local African Americans – one man and five women. They attempted to eat lunch together as a group at the Ponce de Leon Motor Lodge and were promptly arrested and booked in jail. Most of the participants in this act of civil disobedience were released after the first night, but Burkholder was detained for three nights before being released. The story was

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<sup>209</sup> Schlabach, 457-459; Burkholder, John R. "Hershberger, Guy F. (1896-1989)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia*. 1989. 2020. (accessed May 20, 2020) [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Hershberger,\\_Guy\\_F.\\_\(1896-1989\)&oldid=160417](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Hershberger,_Guy_F._(1896-1989)&oldid=160417)

carried in newspapers across the country. While it could be argued that Burkholder's position at Harvard, his high-profile companions from Massachusetts, and the notoriety of some of the African American involved – Robert Hayling was a local dentist, and Lilian Robertson was an activist whose home had been firebombed by the Ku Klux Klan less than a month before the incident at the restaurant – brought about the press coverage, Burkholder provides another example of a Mennonite who was actively protesting for civil rights.<sup>210</sup>

### **Mennonite Influence on Vincent Harding**

Harding's relationship with Mennonites was a complicated one, with an interesting legacy. Tobin Miller Shearer, the director of the African American Studies Program at the University of Montana, interviewed Vincent Harding in 1992, attempting to obtain information about a trip made by Harding and four other Mennonites through the South in 1959, when Harding first met Martin Luther King, Jr. According to Shearer, while Harding was gracious, he would not talk about that 1959 trip, and Shearer characterized that interview as "the shortest interview I conducted for the book," lasting less than 20 minutes. When Shearer again attempted to interview Harding in the late 2000s, Harding was unwilling to discuss his past among the Mennonites. Clearly, there had been problems. He spoke a bit more freely about his connection with Mennonites in a 1997 interview with his daughter, but here, too, there was evidence of unresolved conflict.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Myrna Burkholder, "A Civil Rights Reunion," *The World Together*, October 10, 2018, *Mennonite World Review* (accessed February 3, 2020) <http://mennoworld.org/2018/10/10/the-world-together/a-civil-rights-reunion/>

<sup>211</sup> Shearer, "A Prophet."

Toward the end of the interview, Harding is asked about his rather diverse religious background that included connections with Seventh Day Adventists, Mennonites, and academic connections with Methodist and Buddhist organizations. He had the following to say:

I'm trying to figure out how much to say or not say at this point... When people have asked me lately about what kind of name I have for myself, religiously, what I've been toying with is the title, "Pilgrim in Search of a Name." ...I feel that a lot the people we've mentioned in this conversation are sort of a scattered community of ours. So I am very conscious of having been a pilgrim for a long time.<sup>212</sup>

This was a tactful, if vague, way to answer. Why does he argue with himself about how much to "not say?" Although not overly effusive about his time as a Mennonite, he does take the opportunity to single out one, but only one, specific Mennonite for praise. The second to the last line is also telling when he talks about individuals he has come across in the past as a "scattered community." Is he thinking of Titus Bender of Meridian, Mississippi as a member of this community in a way Mennonites in general were not?

Harding first came to prominence in the academic community with the 1981 publication of *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*. Not only did this work establish Harding as an important scholar of history, it also became required reading in African American studies programs, as well as in History programs around the country. Although the work deals with the period ending with the Civil War – an era with scant interaction between Mennonites and African Americans, and well as before his time of interaction with them – there are definite hints of Mennonite influence on his thinking present in this work.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Harding and Harding, "Democracy and Spirit," 697.

<sup>213</sup> Vincent Harding, *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1981).



Harding makes heavy use of the river metaphor. Speaking of the history of the Southern black struggle, he said: “I was especially concerned to try to convey its long, continuous movement, flowing like a river....”<sup>214</sup>

At first, as the river metaphor took life within me... ..it is possible to recognize that we are indeed the river, and at the same time that the river is more than us – generations more, millions more. .... So we black people are the river; the river is us.<sup>215</sup>

This entire notion of the continuity of a peoplehood is not unique to Mennonites, but it is certainly present in the group, and something Harding would have felt keenly, as he was, in many ways not entirely a part of that particular peoplehood, for all that he was an ordained minister of the group.

Harding continues with the theme:

...the river moves toward a freedom that liberates the whole person and humanizes the entire society, pressing us beyond the boundaries of race, class, and nationality that serve temporarily, necessarily, as our organizing, stabilizing bases. From my perspective, this is the magnificent opening toward which the river has been moving, the great ocean of humanity’s best hope that it has always held and nurtured at the center of its own bursting life.<sup>216</sup>

Because it is my river, both by ancestral heritage and personal choice, I care deeply about both its past and its ultimate destination.<sup>217</sup>

There is much in this passage that speaks to Harding’s connection with Mennonites, particularly as it relates to ancestral heritage and personal choice. For better or for worse, Mennonites are deeply connected to their ethnic backgrounds, sometimes to such a degree they fail to consider its impact on their world view. Knowing of Harding’s initial draw to the teachings of the

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<sup>214</sup> Harding, *There is a River*, XVIII-XIX.

<sup>215</sup> Harding, *There is a River*, XIX.

<sup>216</sup> Harding, *There is a River*, XXIV.

<sup>217</sup> Harding, *There is a River*, XXIV.

Anabaptists, coupled with his turbulent time with their often culturally tradition-bound descendants, the Mennonites, it is not hard to see him thinking of them when he speaks of moving beyond race, ethnicity, and class as “stabilizing bases.” It is often hard for Mennonites, as it is for many people, to move beyond these issues. His disappointment with the group for largely failing to live up to his ideal of them is clear. Harding refers to his own religious upbringing in a general sort of way “Having been raised in a tightly knit, Bible-centered black church community in Harlem...” He also refers to his Mennonite experience in a rather veiled manner “...it is likely that many experiences in my own unorthodox pilgrimage helped fortify that tendency.” He then mentions his wife Rosamarie Harding (who, unlike her husband was raised Mennonite) and their move to the South in 1961, though he fails to mention Mennonites or the MCC as the means of him traveling to Atlanta. That is as close as we get to any mention of Mennonites, prior to a brief paragraph in the Acknowledgements section at the end. Interestingly, Mennonites are not listed in the index, though other religious groups are. Their oft touted signing of the Germantown protest against slavery, though period appropriate, and well known to him, gets no mention in the text. Perhaps he had seen it taken as an easy out by Mennonites one too many times.<sup>218</sup>

Harding weaves in a number of phrases of religious significance throughout the introduction, beyond just the notion of “river.” Hebrews Chapter 11 lists Old Testament saints, as a way of encouraging early Christians to persist in their faith with confidence. Chapter 12 refers to this group as “a great cloud of witnesses.” This phrase appears over and over in Harding introductory remarks, beginning in the very first paragraph.

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<sup>218</sup> Harding, *There is a River*, XII-XIII.

This work is an experiment in history, solidarity, and hope. It is part of a continuing attempt to discover and develop the sources of creative tension among my responsibilities as a historian, my commitment to human liberation, and my urgent determination to keep faith with that magnificent company of witnesses – my mothers and fathers – whose lives form the wellsprings of the black struggle for freedom in America.<sup>219</sup>

He is clearly setting the struggle of African Americans into a Biblical framework, setting out the story of the earlier struggles in the ongoing movement for justice, liberation, and equality. His work lists pioneers in the struggle for African American freedom in the same way that Hebrews 11 sets out previous heroes of the faith for the early Christians. Written, as this was, in 1981, there was clearly more struggle ahead, so in that way this work would also serve as encouragement for those in the fight. Harding's acknowledgement of his predecessors in the fight also has a Mennonite point of reference – *Martyrs Mirror* – a work detailing the stories of those who lost their lives for their faith, a work that is revered in Mennonite circles, and most certainly a work that a Mennonite minister or a scholar of Anabaptists – Harding was both – would have been familiar with.

Harding was quick to point out historical and religious hypocrisies and ironies in this work. “Popes, bishops, and professors provided the blessing and the rationale for their incursions into the lives and histories of other civilizations.” Perhaps he was remembering the Mennonites who rationalized the religious principles of nonresistance to oppose marches and sit ins on behalf of African Americans. He makes a point to mention specific slaves ship names such as *Brotherhood*, *John the Baptist*, *Justice*, *Integrity*, *Gift of God*, *Liberty*, *Morning Star*, *Young Saint Paul*, and *Good Intent* as showcasing the use of religious language to gloss over injustice. Harding also discusses the movement during the Revolutionary period in which

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<sup>219</sup> Harding, *There is a River*, XI.

African Americans sought their freedom using the language of the white colonists striving for freedom from the British: “In their petition they took the ideology of the white revolutionaries more seriously than did the whites themselves...” Was he thinking of the way in which the Mennonites had failed to live up to their Anabaptists creed in their dealings with him specifically, and African American generally when he wrote this?<sup>220</sup>

When the Connecticut petitioners referred to “Revelation” as an element of their position on black freedom, they were pointing specifically to the teaching of the Bible and theoretical doctrines of the white churches. Black people knew, of course, that the contradictions between theory and practice were often as intense in this sensitive area as in any other, and they chose to struggle within the churches with such contradictions in mind. With certain notable exceptions, the white church, like every other institution in the North America colonies, had been used to defend white supremacy and justify black slavery.<sup>221</sup>

It strikes me that he does not take a line or two to explain who the “certain notable exceptions” were. Of course, Quakers are often noted for their early and vocal opposition to slavery (though there were slave owning Quakers as well.) However, the first public statement against slavery issued by Quakers in the 1680s in Pennsylvania, was also signed by Mennonites. Someone with Harding’s grasp of this material, not to mention his strong connection to Mennonites, would have been well aware of this. It is worth noting that he chose to pass over it. As I mentioned earlier, I would attribute this as a response, intentional or not, to the hypocrisy he had experienced with the group.

Perhaps the most stinging indictment that could be perceived as a swipe against Mennonites regarding race relations comes from the following quote:

Meanwhile, in 1787 Philadelphia’s black people were given additional evidence that white American political leaders were no different from the religious leaders when it

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<sup>220</sup> Harding, *There Is A River*, 5-6, 3,8, 43.

<sup>221</sup> Harding, *There is a River*, 43.

came to black freedom. For it was not hard to see that the Constitutional Convention then meeting in the city did not intend to take the rhetoric of their American Revolution into the threatening realms of black slavery, just as most white Christians did not intend to take the love of Jesus out to the auction block.<sup>222</sup>

Harding was a devout Christian. He seems not to be criticizing Christianity so much as criticizing the way in which its white adherents had failed to live up to its standards. It is hard not to imagine him thinking of Mennonites not taking a more active role in bringing the love of Jesus to Birmingham while penning this.

In discussing the sources that he used in creating this work, Harding says: “In other words, I am a part of a cloud of working witnesses, no more, no less, a member in fairly good standing of an ongoing company of investigators, participants, critics, and testifiers.” He proceeds to list out major scholars in the field. While it is clear that he is talking about academics, once again, the overtly religious reference to Hebrews chapters 11 and 12 is unmistakable, as is his commitment to more than simple scholarship. He goes on to say “...I am simply carrying on a tradition, trying to write and to live the story of our struggle, creating a history that has already created me, seeking to keep the faith.” He is clearly conscious of his place in the narrative of his community. The same is true of Mennonites who are aware of their history in a way that is not common with many groups. African Americans are also aware of the impact of their history to a much greater degree than are many white Americans. While it is impossible to know for certain if his notion of place and role in history first entered Harding’s consciousness through his connection to Mennonites, there is little doubt that they were nurtured and strengthened therein.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Harding, *There is a River*, 45

<sup>223</sup> Harding, *There is a River*, XXII-XXIII.

So I write in hope that some men and women will read the words and recognize that they/we are the essential force, are the river, are the vision. I write, trusting that some parents and grandparents and teachers will read aloud and share this with the children, will become new sources of memory, will remind one another that our destination has always been a new transformed humanity, a new humanized society (not 'equal opportunity' in a dehumanized one), will remember that we have come this far at great cost.<sup>224</sup>

While the idea of a strong community is not unique to Mennonites, it is an ideal they possess in abundance, and an area of commonality they share with African Americans, a connection that must have surely attracted Harding when he became a part of the group. We see in the above quote, the importance not only of history, but the tremendous loss and sacrifice leading to the present day. The above quote could be applied in a strictly Mennonite context with little alteration.

Harding's introduction invokes a sense of living on the margins. Take this passage, for example:

Such a quest for meaning in history, such attempts to lift our eyes from the past toward the future, at times to venture beyond both past and future, are not often fashionable in the realms of academe (which is one reason why I have spent so much of my time on the blurred and questionable edges of its domain.)<sup>225</sup>

In the Acknowledgements section at the end of the volume, Harding does specifically mention Mennonites by name, though they were absent in the introduction to, as well as in the body of the work:

As I consider such a sustaining network, two groups must be mentioned, in spite of the fact that my association with them began before the manuscript was conceived. One is the Peace Section of the Mennonite Central Committee, under the leadership of Elmer Neufeld, who originally provided the support that made it possible for Rosemarie and me to be present in the South at the height of the Freedom Movement. The other group goes

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<sup>224</sup> Harding, *There is a River*, XXV, XXII-XXIII.

<sup>225</sup> Harding, *There is a River*, XII.

back further, goes in deeper; it is that gathering of men, women, and children, living and dead, who were my initial nurturing community at Victory Tabernacle Seventh Day Christian Church in Harlem. I am grateful to them for my earliest conscious immersion in the collective hope and religion of the black community, grateful for first learning among them that “There is a river...”<sup>226</sup>

The difference in tone in mentioning these two religious groups is striking. The acknowledgement of the MCC is polite and straightforward. He acknowledges the financial and logistical role the group played in placing him in the South in the early 1960s, where he became associated with Dr. King. There is nothing discourteous in what he writes. His references to the MCC is simply a transactional statement of fact – the Mennonites made it possible for me to become involved in the civil rights movement. It is as if to say they are a separate entity with which I was once in contact, but they are not a core part of my experience or identity. His comments on the Seventh Day Adventist community of which he was a part as a child is much warmer and more familial in tone. He seemingly says, this is my real community. These are the people that made me what I am today. The Adventists of my youth are central to my identity and purpose.

Harding’s words contain nothing overtly negative about the Mennonites, here or elsewhere, outside of the Mennonite press. The confrontation seemed to only have been expressed verbally, or in writing, directly to Mennonites via conference/sermon, or in Mennonite periodicals. After drifting away from the group, he never made mention of them in any critical fashion – certainly not in any mainstream publication. But it is striking that after many years as an ordained minister in the group, he had so little to say about them after leaving. His silence about his time among the Mennonite, which increased as he aged, speaks volumes. Under the

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<sup>226</sup> Harding, *There is a River*, 335.

polite silence, there is, at least to my eyes, clear hurt and disappointment. For better or for worse, Mennonites had an impact on the work of Harding.

The civil rights movement highlighted tensions already present in Mennonite circles, and caused existing divisions to deepen. It also showcased differences not only between the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church, but also within the bodies of each denomination, especially the Mennonite Church with their larger, though not large, African American membership. As has been shown over the course of this chapter, attitudes and policies, particularly in the Mennonite Church, had improved over the days of refusing to hold integrated communion services, and editorials that featured overtly eugenicist language such as the phrase “race suicide.” The paternalistic approaches to African Americans were lessening as well, but Mennonites had a less than a spotless record, and there was much room for improvement.

Mennonite attitudes regarding questions of race are a clear example of acculturation. Mennonites were more involved in the movement, and more impacted by it than a casual observer would have thought. Corporately and individually, Mennonites provided examples of courage that could be celebrated, as well as moments that brought shame, at least to some in the community. There were opportunities for self-reflection and growth, which were sometimes taken, and sometimes not. This period of upheaval overlapped with the Vietnam conflict, which given their history of pacifism, would also seem a likely catalyst for conflict among Mennonites, which it proved to be. The three way division among the Mennonites between Mennonites who had adopted American style fundamentalism, Mennonite Fundamentalists as previously described, and Anabaptist Vision proponents in the Mennonite Church, and the increasingly twofold division between American style fundamentalism and the Anabaptist Vision outlook in



the General Conference Mennonite Church, would deepen in the Vietnam era, widening rifts of opinion that would surface again after unification, and underly conflict over social justice issues in the twenty-first century. The controversy generated in Mennonite circles over civil rights – both in the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church – drew these two denominations ever closer to numerical decline, though they had not yet arrived at that point.

## Chapter 5 – Continued Division and Unification

In this chapter I trace the histories of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church from the Vietnam era through their eventual merger at the turn of the century. Fault lines that had previously begun to develop in both groups continued to grow, though the outcome of these increasingly disparate schools of thought in both denominations had different results in each, ultimately producing a more unified Mennonite Church and a more diverse General Conference Mennonite Church by the end of the twentieth century. I make extensive use of both *The Gospel Herald*, the denominational publication for the Mennonite Church and *The Mennonite*, the denominational periodical of the General Conference group, to explore the debates surrounding both peace activism and discussions of a possible merger as the century progressed. These sources also indicate that Mennonites were concerned about issues of growth and decline, and of the life cycle of religious groups, though they did not use that specific term. I will also be making use of selected interviews, as well as David Haury's 1981 history of the Western District of the General Conference Mennonite Church, to show how opinions on war and peace shifted among Mennonites in this era, particularly in the central and western parts of the United States. Additionally, I will be making use of secondary sources that discuss peace activism and the Vietnam war from both Mennonite and mainstream American perspectives.

The growing division in Mennonite circles between mainstream fundamentalists who happened to be Mennonite, Mennonite Fundamentalists, and advocates of the Anabaptist Vision, continued. These differences are highlighted clearly by the war in Vietnam, with those participating in or supporting the war, often from a fear of communism, being the most influenced by mainstream American fundamentalism. Those more committed to Mennonite Fundamentalism opposed participation in the war, taking the long-established separatist position.

As they did during the near contemporaneous civil rights movement, this camp opposed protest and heavy political involvement. Those espousing the Anabaptist Vision were much more comfortable not only openly criticizing the government, but also challenging those Mennonites they felt were not being true to Anabaptist principles, prefiguring an argument that will take center stage in the early twenty-first century debate over homosexuality, as described in Chapter 6.

There was some back and forth as we shall see, but by the 1980s, the most conservative among the Mennonite Fundamentalists had quietly left, dissenting in a fashion entirely consistent with their belief that it was most important to avoid a conflict they deemed unresolvable. Those that remained in the Mennonite Church tended to speak with a more uniform voice due to the episcopal structure of governance that has been described in past chapters. Although that was weakening somewhat, by the turn of the century, the official position of the Mennonite Church was focused on peace-making as opposed to nonresistance, much more in keeping with the Anabaptist Vision. Not all rank-and-file members of the denomination strongly supported this position, per se, but neither were they strongly enough opposed to depart or criticize, thus leaving the more progressive Anabaptist Vision group with control of the denomination. The situation in the General Conference Mennonite Church was a bit different. This group, again due to a more congregationally autonomous structure, had always allowed individuals and congregations much more latitude in belief and practice, and this remained true during the Vietnam War and beyond. Anabaptist Vision people were vocal and present, though with less official authority than their counterparts in the Mennonite Church. Pockets of Mennonite Fundamentalism existed in the denomination as well, though they were literally less visible than their Mennonite Church counterparts. By the 1950s, they had mostly given up use of the

German language, something that once set them apart, and they had never espoused separation in dress, making them blend in with their surroundings much more easily. Then too, these General Conference Mennonites who clung to a more traditional identity felt less pressure to leave the larger group as they perceived themselves less bound to official denominational stances and statements – something the General Conference group encouraged as this chapter will show. There was a much larger contingent of Mennonites in this denomination who embraced mainstream American fundamentalism, which I will also explore in the coming pages. As such, by the turn of the century, the General Conference Mennonite Church held more diversity of opinion and practice than did the Mennonite Church.

### **Continued Division and Unification**

Tension in both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church had grown during the civil rights movement and would continue along that path as the Vietnam War progressed. The separate threads of fundamentalism, military service, and activism were beginning to meld in such a way that the divisions between advocates for the Anabaptist Vision and fundamentalists of both the mainstream American style and the Mennonite variety were solidifying, eventually leading to schisms in the Mennonite Church. Indeed, a three-way division was also taking place among other protestant Christians in the United States at the same time, though the contours of the division differed.

Those who believed in the Anabaptist Vision in both denominations were concerned about issues of social justice – not only racial reconciliation, as we saw in Chapter 4, but also the appropriate use of material resources. As I have shown, the means of advocating for such causes ran the gamut from holding seminars and issuing position resolutions to actively taking part in

protests. While Anabaptist Vision advocates were involved to varying degrees in these activities, the more conservative fundamentalists of both persuasions were beginning to borrow rhetoric from conservative American culture, something that had become increasingly common during the civil rights era, with some going so far as to claim that civil rights marches were being organized by communist subversives. Activism and communism had often been linked in the popular imagination in the United States going all the way back to the fear that the 1919 Boston Police strike was part of a communist takeover plot. Religious historian E. Timothy Smith has discussed the varied responses among western intellectuals to the threat posed by communism in his book *Opposition Beyond the Water's Edge*.<sup>227</sup> While this fear eased somewhat in the 1920s, it again gained ground in the late 1940s and early 1950s, particularly after the Soviet Union tested their first atomic weapon, years ahead of schedule – setting off a search for spies.

## **Vietnam**

In 1954 the United States began its involvement with the growing civil war in Vietnam whose outcome was seen by American policy makers to be integral to the containment of a communist threat from both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Many Americans feared that communist ideology was rapidly spreading through Asia. Barely done with fighting in Korea, the United States embarked on another mission to halt the spread of communism in French Indochina. Soon the French departed in defeat. For United States governments led by both Republican and Democratic administrations, what began as an advisory role to the South Vietnamese government would eventually evolve into a direct combat situation by the mid-1960s. America was committed, not only to squelching communism at home, but

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<sup>227</sup> E. Timothy Smith, *Opposition Beyond the Water's Edge: Liberal Internationalists, Pacifists and Containment, 1945-1953*. (London: Greenwood Press, 1999), 25.

also stopping its spread abroad. As time went on, the scope of the war grew, and it became evident, not only that the public was being misled, but that no clear victory was in sight. This knowledge led to widening divisions within a country already roiled by a civil rights movement which was marked by increasingly strident protests met with escalating violence. The United States was deeply divided, and Mennonites were also feeling the strain brought about by war. The nation was divided between hawks and doves, and many mainline Christian denominations were struggling to bridge the gap between rival factions. The divisions in Mennonite circles were even more complicated, with three distinctly discernable positions. Some wanted to simply avoid military service, preserving the traditional doctrine of nonresistance. This was the position of the Mennonite Fundamentalists. Others continued to advocate for conscientious objection (an option with increasing support in the wider American culture), but felt that alone was insufficient, and who advocated for a more active peacemaking witness. These were the proponents of the Anabaptist Vision, and they were gaining ground, at least at the level of national denominational leadership in both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church. Finally, there were some who felt not only that the war was justified, but that military service was not incompatible with a Mennonite identity. These were the Mennonites inspired by mainstream American fundamentalism. While they were not as significant a force in the Mennonite Church, they were increasing in number in the General Conference group, at least at the individual and congregational levels. The beginnings of this divergence in viewpoint could be seen by the end of World War II, but was becoming more noticeable as the twentieth century wore on.

Interestingly, David Settje has divided the response of mainline Christian denominations into three distinct camps regarding Vietnam as well – 1) conservatives who supported not only

the war, but the ideology behind it, 2) liberals who supported neither, and 3) conservatives who moderated their position as the war progressed. The first position, startling as it may seem, has a similar counterpart in Mennonite circles. Many General Conference Mennonites, particularly in the central plains and the west were increasingly accepting mainstream American fundamentalism with its pro patriotic stance as we will see. The second of Settje's categories – the liberals – are mirrored by those promoting an active peace witness – followers of the Anabaptist Vision. While not a perfect match, there is some resemblance in Mennonite circles to Settje's third category. These would include Mennonite Fundamentalist who opposed *participation*, but found a way to support, or at least not oppose the actions of the state – a tactic we will see discussed again as we explore the departure of some of these congregations from the Mennonite Church.<sup>228</sup>

The Mennonite Central Committee, with its work in Vietnam, represents one strand of the more active and activist peace witness – perhaps the nucleus of the group that would rally around the Anabaptist Vision as first articulated by Harold Bender in the 1940s. The Mennonite Central Committee, as discussed in Chapter 2, was a service organization with members from a variety of Mennonite groups founded in 1920. MCC had workers on the ground in Vietnam in 1954, immediately following the signing of the Geneva Accords ending the French Indochina War. Agents of the MCC remained in Vietnam even after the United States pulled out troops and diplomats, only leaving in 1976, when all non-Vietnamese citizens were required to depart. Not only did they maintain their nonresistance stance, but they actively voiced concerns about American policy in Vietnam on issues ranging from the seemingly politically based decisions

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<sup>228</sup> See David Settje, *Faith and War: How Christians Debated the Cold and Vietnam Wars* (New York: New York University Press, 2011.)

about who could receive aid, to criticisms that the United States military presence was causing civilian suffering. Paul Longacre began directing MCC operations on the ground in 1964, and was often critical, not only of the government of South Vietnam, but also of American actions. Executive Secretary of the organization, William Snyder, who was based in the United States, was not shy about engaging with the federal government, writing to President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965 to express his concern about the expansion of the war.<sup>229</sup>

There was debate from within the MCC as to whether or not the organization was too closely aligned with the policies of the United States government. While some felt they were too closely aligned, and should pull out, others argued that their presence in Vietnam, which necessitated some cooperation with the federal government was the only way to see what was happening, so as to accurately and effectively protest against policies they deemed wrong. Thus, they remained. There was another significant element to having Mennonites on the ground. Some of the workers who came in the late 1950s and early 1960s came from homes that were in many ways separated from the concerns of the larger culture – homes that under other circumstances would have felt nonresistance was enough, and who might have had reservations about actively criticizing the government. This also helped to fuel a movement on the part of some Mennonites to refuse to pay taxes as a war protest. MCC director Delton Franz, headquartered in Washington DC, supported such a stance, and in 1972 the MCC created what they called Taxes for Peace Fund where Mennonites could send their withheld tax dollars to support the peace work of the organization – clearly several steps removed from simple

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<sup>229</sup> Karen Treadway and Major Treadway, “MCC, Vietnam, and Legacies of War,” in *Intersections: MCC Theory and Practice Quarterly* 2 Vol 5, Spring 2017, 1, 3; See also Luke S. Martin, *A Vietnam Presence: Mennonites in Vietnam During the American War* (Morgantown, PA: Masthof Press, 2016) for an extensive treatment of the experiences of Mennonite relief workers in Vietnam during the conflict.



conscientious objection to serving in the military. This is hardly surprising – Franz was also an outspoken advocate of race based civil rights, as we saw in the previous chapter. Clearly activism in one area was related to activism in others. The presence of family members in Vietnam, coupled with their correspondence home, moved some in Mennonite circles to a much more active peace stance than they might have otherwise taken. The presence of Mennonites in Vietnam had a direct effect on the actions and behavior of Mennonites in the United States, leading some Mennonites into a type of activism that some of their peers would find unacceptable.<sup>230</sup>

It has often been the case in Mennonite circles, that the presence of a friend or family member in an activity once considered taboo, renders that activity acceptable. One Low German Mennonite, who had been raised in Kansas and spent most of his adult life in Oklahoma provides a clear example. This gentleman came from a conservative General Conference Mennonite home. (This was a home that could be characterized as the General Conference version of Mennonite Fundamentalism. While they did not dress differently, and spoke English, at least outside the home, they still stressed separation from the world. For example, they refused to purchase insurance, as they saw that as too close of an association with nonbelievers. While this may sound odd to those unfamiliar with Mennonite practice, this is emblematic of the most conservative Mennonites, though not commonly promoted among the more acculturated.) This man married a woman from a similar, though slightly less conservative background. The couple both considered themselves to be from strongly pacifistic homes. Indeed, this gentleman registered as a Conscientious Objector during the Vietnam War. Years later, one of his sons enlisted in the military and then made it a career. The wife characterized their son's choice as

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<sup>230</sup> Treadway, "MCC, Vietnam, and Legacies of War," 6-7.

difficult in the beginning, but as time passed both husband and wife modified their views. The husband came to view his commitment to peace in more interpersonal terms, with less emphasis on the national military component. When he did consider it, he said he had come to view a strong military as an inducement to peace. His son became a member of a Mennonite congregation near his base, without conflict, even as an active member of the armed forces. All three found ways to reconcile their beliefs with their careers and relationships. These individuals were hardly the exception. In most General Conference Mennonite Churches, at least in many places, the peace doctrine has ceased to be a concern.<sup>231</sup> This same tendency to reconcile changing a long-held doctrine when it touches a member of the group again became apparent as Mennonites dealt with issues of gender and sexuality in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, an issue that will be examined in depth in Chapter 6.

The activist approach among Mennonites who subscribed to the Anabaptist Vision mirrors in many ways what was happening among mainstream Christian denominations during this same period. As George Bogaski has pointed out, some elements in the mainline churches that were very critical of American policy in Vietnam, and they were often defended in this stance by the clergy, though as he makes clear, many at the congregational level were uncomfortable with what they viewed as activism that was critical of the government. In discussing Vietnam, one progressive bishop in the Episcopal Church said it was “not treason to disagree with the US Government.” Supporting those who opposed the war in Vietnam often proved to be an act of dissent in and of itself by the clergy against the majority of their own congregants. Indeed, in looking at some of the periodical literature from the mainlines during this

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<sup>231</sup> Horn, “Acculturation,” 44; Don Janzen, interviewed by the author, Bessie, OK, May 11, 2010; Jane Janzen, interviewed by the author, Bessie, OK, May 11, 2010; Theiszen interview; Coon, “Peace Church,” 155-156.

era, the stance of most church members becomes clear, with articles that questioned American foreign policy drawing angry letters to the editor at rates as high as four to one in support of the government's position on the issue. Many of these mainline leaders supported dissent in terms both political and religious. While stressing the importance of the very American principle of freedom of speech, these ministers also looked to the scriptures for support. Challenging the notions of some of their parishioners who felt political disagreement was sinful and rebellious, they pointed to the Old Testament prophets who called for judgment on Israel for injustice.<sup>232</sup> This divide between leadership and laity was also evident in both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference.

The idea that opposition to the Vietnam War was inappropriate at best, and sinful and dangerous at worst, was held by many of the laity in mainline churches. Many of these individuals felt their leadership was not representative of them, and they began founding parachurch organizations within their denominations – groups such as the Good News Society, the Forum For Scriptural Christianity, Methodist and Episcopalian groups, respectively. These organizations both put out periodicals, as did Presbyterians. The title *The Presbyterian Layman* hints at the perceived divide between denominational leadership and local congregants. These more conservative subgroups pushed for more emphasis on saving the souls of individuals, and less on promoting what earlier in the century would have been referred to as the social gospel.<sup>233</sup> These divisions, and the title of the Episcopal body, with its emphasis on Scriptural Christianity, show elements of fundamentalism within a solidly mainline body, and hint at the splinter groups that would periodically leave the Episcopal Church, and form various “Continuing Anglican”

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<sup>232</sup> Bogaski, *American Protestants and the Debate Over the Vietnam War*, 32-33.

<sup>233</sup> Bogaski, *American Protestant*, 53-71.

groups in the following decades. These same divisions, and the separate publications they engendered, were taking place in the Mennonite Church during this era as well, as we shall see in the next section.

The conservative evangelicals' approach to the Vietnam War differed from that of the mainline churches where there was clearly division – a situation shared by both General Conference Mennonites and members of the Mennonite Church, albeit with issues beyond just protest versus acceptance. Whereas there was a diversity of opinion, and a willingness to consider pacifism in mainline circles, the conservative evangelicals spoke with a much more unified voice. While differences of opinion on the war were not entirely absent, they were small in both scale and intensity. By and large the conservative evangelicals, many with fundamentalist leanings, supported the American War in Vietnam, as a part of a greater battle between good and evil. This very black and white notion of the issue, as well as others, fit nicely into their overall view of the world as a set of basic choices. Simplistic as this seems, it had immense appeal to people tired of the confusion they perceived as a product of manners and morals in constant flux. It represented security and certainty, and they wholeheartedly supported American policy in Vietnam. Many conservative groups with roots in the holiness movement of the mid 1800s and the Pentecostal revival movement of the early 1900s had once promoted pacifism, or at least supported individuals who were opposed to war. One finds many of the CPS workers listing denominations such as Assembly of God, Pentecostal Holiness, and Nazarene as their faith. By the middle of the period of American involvement in Vietnam, these denominations had moved away from that stance, often without providing any scriptural support for the change. One Nazarene editor, when asked about pacifism, replied that it was “too far

out.” While lacking in intellectual rigor, this response nicely demonstrates the almost complete acceptance of the war effort by conservative evangelicals.<sup>234</sup>

As other scholars have pointed out, some conservative evangelicals, who would also consider themselves fundamentalists, moved away from pacifism in the 1960s. This holds true for General Conference Mennonites as well. Many who were influenced by mainstream American style fundamentalism went down this path. It is a complicated story, with many contributing factors. As has already been discussed, there was a clear move away from taking conscientious objector status, or even alternative service as shown by the percentage of drafted Mennonites during the Second World War accepting active duty. In parts of the Great Plains and west, in areas like Oklahoma, the Mennonites were a definite minority – very much outside the Mennonite “heartland.” Such a location – isolated as it were from larger Mennonite settlements – put these individuals in a unique position. They were more susceptible to misunderstanding and harassment, as shown in Chapter 2, and this continued to be the case into the World War II era. These General Conference congregations were less distinct in appearance, meaning that language was their most identifying characteristic. With the anti-German hysteria of the World War I, and to a lesser extent, World War II, the pressure to give up that language was intense. As discussed in Chapter 3, the distinctiveness of a separate language was largely lost, and there was little to distinguish them, at least visually from their neighbors.

Because Mennonites were becoming more culturally similar to their non-Mennonite neighbors, interactions increased. More Mennonite children were attending public school, exposing them to new people and new ideas. This increasing familiarity, combined with their

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<sup>234</sup> Bogaski, *American Protestants*, 77-95.

isolation relative to larger Mennonite centers, coupled with their greater exposure via school, made intermarriage with those outside their local churches not only increasingly viable, but also increasingly common. The presence of non-ethnic Mennonite spouses in homes, many of whom came from religious traditions that did not espouse pacifism and accepted fundamentalism, only accelerated social acculturation, in something of circular pattern – acculturation begat more acculturation. This trend also led to a lessening of emphasis on the nonresistant stance and increasing associations with the conservative evangelicals in their local communities. This is not to say that all aspects of Mennonite identity faded, or were lost, but they did change, as some individuals, and consequently some congregations, adopted positions, including conservative politics and a relatively pro military stance – at least in comparison to their immigrant ancestors – more similar to the larger communities in which they lived.<sup>235</sup>

As with other issues, Vietnam was debated in the Mennonite press, and the lines of division I have highlighted in this discussion are clearly evident. Take the June 29, 1965 *Gospel Herald* as an example. The cover says much: “PEACE Sunday July 4.” Such a statement makes clear the increasingly strong hold the Anabaptist Vision followers were having over the official stance of the Mennonite Church. Declaring Independence Day Peace Day seemingly takes a shot not only at militarism, but also patriotism, and the issue does not disappoint in that respect. In an article entitled “Thoughts on Nationalism” Martha Huebert challenges not only the conflation of religious and national identity in America, but also what she deems an unreasonable fear of communism:

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<sup>235</sup> Horn, “Acculturation” 36-47; A. Johnson interview; JoAnn Johnson, interviewed by the author, via telephone, April 28, 2010; Theiszen interview; Jane Janzen interview, Don Janzen interview, Evelyn Workman interview.

...when a nation has become wealthy and powerful, people tend to put their faith in it, or in its political system, rather than God. Is this not why so many church members practically equate “democracy” with “Christianity”? They even accuse the poor, persecutes [sic] Christians in communist held lands of being “spies” or “agents,” when they come here to visit.<sup>236</sup>

The author goes on to cast doubt on the common notion that the founding fathers of the United States were mostly devout Christians, and to criticize the notion that the United States is a Christian nation. She also says “the ‘my country, right or wrong’ attitude is unchristian.” Publishing such an issue is a fairly provocative way to celebrate America’s birthday. Making such a public statement is the type of thing Anabaptist Vision adherents would understand, the type of thing Mennonite Fundamentalists would say is outside the scope of their concern, and the type of thing that would irritate American style fundamentalist Mennonites. And it must be remembered, this was an article, not a letter to the editor or a response which could be passed off as “not necessarily the opinion” of the publication.<sup>237</sup>

This same issue of the *Gospel Herald* also included a copy of a letter sent to President Johnson from the Executive Committee of the Mennonite Central Committee describing the work of the Mennonite in Vietnam and lamenting what they saw as the escalation of hostilities. The MCC encourages Johnson to work for a negotiated peace, and to enter into unconditional discussions with “whomever necessary” to stop the bombing of North Vietnam and end the human suffering it created. This piece again shows the strength of the Anabaptist Vision among the editors and publishers of the official denominational periodical of the Mennonite Church, and it clearly had an activist stance. Nevertheless, the presence of Mennonite Fundamentalism made its presence known. On the same page on which the letter was posted, there is a photograph of a

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<sup>236</sup> Martha Huebert, “Thoughts on Nationalism” in *Gospel Herald* Vol 57 No 25 June 29, 1965, 538.

<sup>237</sup> Huebert, “Thoughts on Nationalism,” 538.

young Merle Good (who will feature in the debate about unification toward the end of the chapter). He had just been appointed youth director in the Lancaster Conference, and he is wearing the regulation “plain coat” once common in Mennonite circles. While Mennonite Fundamentalists were growing uncomfortable, they had not all left yet.<sup>238</sup>

There was some moderate pushback in the *Gospel Herald*. For example, in a piece entitled “Extremism” the author, simply signed “D,” acknowledges the dangers of rightwing extremism, but also cautions that extremism can be found on the left as well:

What about left extremist? While the rightist is a defender of the *status quo* and will fight every effort to change, it seems that the leftist seeks to be a destroyer of the *status quo*. Such are critical of things as they are. Such see flaws or imagine flaws in just about everything and assume the responsibility to do all within their power to do away with the *status quo* as they see it.<sup>239</sup>

The tenor of this piece typifies the inter-Mennonite style of conflict. A case is made, but individuals are not singled out, there is no name calling, and the approach is relatively courteous. This piece, one that could be construed as more amenable to the Mennonite Fundamentalist view, also goes to show that the greatest level of division in the Mennonite Church was between the Anabaptist Way and Mennonite Fundamentalism, with much less input from Mennonites who had fully accepted American style mainstream fundamentalism.

The General Conference press also dealt with Vietnam. There was no dearth of Anabaptist Vision inspired material, but the fact that some Mennonites had adopted mainstream American style fundamentalism and given up on the peace doctrine and accepted military service and solutions is acknowledged, though with a tone of sadness. There were calls to get out of

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<sup>238</sup> Executive Committee of the Mennonite Central Committee “A Letter to the President” in *Gospel Herald* Vol 57 No 25 June 29, 1965, 567.

<sup>239</sup> D., “Extremism” in *Gospel Herald* Vol 58 No 26, June 6, 1965, 577.



Vietnam, such as were made in the “News” section of *The Mennonite* in the March 23, 1965 issue where the unnamed author of “Vietnam Threatens World Peace” calls into question the validity of the domino theory – the idea that when one country goes communist, the neighboring countries follow suit. He claims that America’s fear of Chinese domination in the region was ridiculous even if South Vietnam became communist, claiming that neither the Vietnamese nor the Russians had any interest in the Chinese expanding their influence into the region. In common with the author’s Mennonite Church counterparts, he or she advocates for negotiations to stop the war and encourages donations to the Mennonite Central Committee so that they can continue their relief work in the region. This is all fairly standard-issue Anabaptist Vision fare – engage politically, oppose war, actively advocate for peace, and it is not an isolated example – there were many articles advocating such a position in *The Mennonite*.<sup>240</sup>

On an unnumbered page, following the index section of the December 26, 1965 issue of *The Mennonite*, a careful observer will find a seemingly regretful acknowledgement of the presences of Mennonites in the General Conference who had thrown off the peace distinctive, and had embraced mainstream American style fundamentalism with its patriotic and promilitary stance. The placement perhaps hints at the possible embarrassment of the editorial staff at the presence of such people in their fold. The article is entitled “PLEASE NO LITERATURE on the war in Vietnam,” and no author is listed – though context indicates it is from the editorial staff. Having something on the back page was common practice in *The Mennonite*. Still, one wonders

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<sup>240</sup> “Vietnam Threatens World Peace” in *The Mennonite* Vol 80 No 12, March 23, 1965.

about the placement of such an important topic. This largely hidden one-page article is followed by several blank pages and could easily go unnoticed.<sup>241</sup>

We asked our church leaders about their interest in a special issue of our magazine on Vietnam. We thought they might want to plan discussion meetings on this troubling problem... One man wrote back "Please, no literature on the war in Vietnam... Another man said... ..he didn't want it since "85 to 90 percent of our people are not *nonresistant*." <sup>242</sup>

In typical Mennonite fashion, the individuals who made these statements are not called out by name. And it is clear from the rest of the article, the author(s) strongly promote not only nonresistance but also activism for peace as most verbal advocates of the Anabaptist Vision did. Indeed, the writer follows the trend of mainline ministers cited earlier in challenging their congregants' prowar status, seeing themselves in the role of prophet and making explicit connections to the Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament in calling people to repentance.

Leadership in the General Conference recognized the presence of these individuals and congregations, and while not advocating for the position, nonetheless sought to accommodate them. This is particularly true in the Western District Conference, which ironically was also often a denominational leader in peace initiatives. In 1969 the conference proposed a resolution that read "We recognize total noncooperation with the Selective Service System as a meaningful witness to one's beliefs and as a witness compatible within the historical traditions of the Mennonite church." This resolution passed, but just barely (180-146.) While there was a definite emphasis on a specific peace witness, as opposed to simple nonresistance, there was also

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<sup>241</sup> "PLEASE NO LITERATURE on the war in Vietnam" in *The Mennonite* Vol 80 No 48, December 26, 1965, no page number.

<sup>242</sup> "PLEASE NO LITERATURE."

a sizeable minority uncomfortable with this direction. As time passed, the divide became even clearer.<sup>243</sup>

In 1969 the conference issued a statement that said they supported “conscientious objection to *particular* wars.” Whatever their actual intention, this strangely worded clause hints at the possibility that they would support some wars. In 1970, a resolution was proposed that would have precluded official support for those that would not cooperate with draft boards and stated: “Although we recognize total noncooperation with the Selective Service System as a meaningful witness *for those who so choose*, we as a church and Western District Conference *do not accept* this concept as a church doctrine.” This resolution was defeated (215-146), but it clearly shows the strength of the more conservative/mainstream fundamentalist element as well as their discomfort with the direction some were taking (namely the Anabaptist Vision proponents who were advocating for engagement with the federal government to bring about an end to the war in Vietnam).<sup>244</sup>

There were many viewpoints regarding the war within the General Conference Mennonite Church. Opinion within the General Conference group was widely divergent, and that proved confusing for some drafted individuals, much as it had in the First World War. Many individuals in the General Conference Mennonite Church accepted military service during this era, without loss of membership in, or even garnering censure from, their congregations. Oklahoma Mennonite Evelyn Workman, who grew up in this era, had two brothers who served in the military, one active duty during the Korean War, and one in the National Guard during the Vietnam War. The brother who served during the Vietnam conflict remained a member of his

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<sup>243</sup> David Haury, *Prairie People*, 219-222.

<sup>244</sup> David Haury, *Prairie People*, 219-222.

local Mennonite congregation until his death. When asked if this created unrest in the congregation, this was Workman's response: "No... I never felt like it was a problem with the church elders at all... they know that some of their church members do not adhere to that doctrine, but yet it doesn't seem to be a big deal."<sup>245</sup>

This relaxed emphasis was commonplace, particularly in Oklahoma, and grew as time went on. In fact, the only Dutch/Low German Mennonite denomination in that state that demanded a pacifist stance by the end of the century was the Church of God in Christ Mennonite – a small group referenced in Chapter 1.<sup>246</sup> There is some irony here, as the refusal of military service was the primary motivation of this group for coming to America in the previous century. In another light, though, they were simply following a pattern that had existed among Mennonites for centuries: when conditions became untenable regarding a doctrine, the most traditionally minded simply moved, while others in the group found ways to adapt and remain in place. The results for the remaining group were varied. Some maintained a Mennonite identity, while others eventually blended wholly into their local social and religious culture.

By the time the general public took note of the rise of the religious right in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there were many Mennonites who fit the conservative evangelical mold fairly closely, and who could get behind the more politicized activities of national religious leaders such as Jerry Falwell, and the Moral Majority, and the growing relationship between conservative Christians and the Republican Party. This is particularly true of the Dutch/Low German Mennonite from which many of the individuals in this category came. This group had

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<sup>245</sup> Horn, "Acculturation," 43, Workman interview.

<sup>246</sup> Coon, "Being a Peace Church," 156; Wilma McKee, "Working," 192; Horn, "Acculturation," 43, Workman interview; Iorio, *Faith's Harvest*, 256-257.

always been more inclined to engage in politics when compared with their Swiss/High German coreligionists, as discussed in Chapter 2. Both General Conference Mennonites and members of the Mennonite Church were well aware of this difference, and would point it out, as we shall see later in this chapter as the topic of a merger of the two groups began to gain momentum.<sup>247</sup>

While a transition such as this may initially seem strange, it is solidly within the larger Mennonite story. Over the course of five hundred years, Mennonites faced a similar choice over and over – acculturate and accept varied levels of military service or move to an area more conducive to retaining a pacifist and separatist identity. This choice took the ancestors of many of these Great Plains Mennonites across oceans and continents. And in almost every location in which they settled, there were those who chose to compromise and accept previously frowned upon practices and customs, while the more conservative chose to move on, leaving individuals and congregations who continued to identify as Mennonite to varying degrees and for varied lengths of time, even as they blended in with the surrounding culture. While outside the focus of this study it is interesting and relevant to note that there were self-identified Mennonites in 1930s and 1940s Germany who had completely given up pacifism and gave unstinting support to Hitler.<sup>248</sup>

Despite the growing divide in Mennonite circles, the more activist proponents of the Anabaptist Vision were gaining control of the voice of their denominations at the national level.

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<sup>247</sup> Horn, “Acculturation,” 44-45; Theiszen interview; For a thorough treatment of the rise of the religious right, see Daniel Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.)

<sup>248</sup> See Horn “Acculturation”; Dean Taylor, “Mennonite Nazis: A Lesson From History” in *The Heartbeat of the Remnant* November/December 2012 Ephrata Ministries (accessed February 20, 2020) <http://www.ephrataministries.org/remnant-2012-11-mennonite-nazis.a5w>; See Steven Mark Schroeder, “Prussian Mennonites in the Third Reich and Beyond: The Uneasy Synthesis of National and Religious Myths” (Master’s Thesis: University of British Columbia, 2001); See also Emil Händiges, “Vereinigung der Deutschen Mennonitengemeinden: Eine Notwendige Berichtigung,” *Mennonitische Blätter* 81, No. 6 (June 1934).

Paul Toews asserts that the twin concepts of “lordship of Christ” and “Christian Witness to the State” became the overarching principles by which the Mennonite Church interacted with the federal government. Drawing on the work of sociologists Leo Driedger and Donald Kraybill, Toews claims that the adoption of these two ideas placed direct criticism of the state not only in acceptable bounds, but in fact made it a requirement for Christians who believed in peace.<sup>249</sup> As has been shown, the General Conference also spoke, at the national level, with an Anabaptist Vision inspired voice.

Given the prominence of the Anabaptist Vision at the national level in both groups, it seems fitting to close this section with a brief exploration of two individuals that embodied this school of thought in their respective denominations – Guy F. Hershberger in the Mennonite Church and Delton Franz from the General Conference Mennonite Church. Both of these individuals had moved well beyond the idea that refusing to serve in the military was a sufficient response to war. Both felt it was the duty of Christians in the Anabaptist tradition to actively oppose war, as their words made clear. They were moving beyond just the Vietnam War, and criticizing militarism in general. As they did so, they began making explicit connections between the growing military complex and other forms of social injustice. They were not the only voices in Mennonite circles expanding their views on the meaning of peace – academic John Howard Yoder in his *The Politics of Jesus* sought to greatly expand the theological meaning of Christ’s atonement in ways that made many uncomfortable in some Mennonite

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<sup>249</sup> Toews, *Mennonites*, 265; Leo Driedger and Donald Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994), 122.

schools of thought. They are significant, however, for their roles in denominational leadership as they helped set the tone for the official voice of their respective denominations.<sup>250</sup>

Delton Franz's involvement in the civil rights movement has already been discussed. He was no stranger to advocating for social justice. In 1968 he became the Director of the Washington Office of National Legislation, a newly established outreach of the Peace Section of the Mennonite Central Committee, a position he would hold for 26 years. He used his post as a liaison to the federal government as a means for pressing the leaders of the United States on a variety of issues, including international peace and justice initiatives, as well as domestic civil rights, and an expansion of the meaning of conscientious objection to include as many peoples as possible under legal protection from being compelled to take life. Hardly giving up on nonresistance, he wanted to expand protections for refusing to bear arms, but he went beyond that concern to call the government to task for a variety of injustices.<sup>251</sup>

His article entitled "Missiles in the Pasture" from the June 24, 1969 issue of *The Mennonite* provides some insight into his critique of the militarism of the Vietnam-era United States, and hints at the type of issues he addressed with political leaders. He begins the article with a personal anecdote:

Out in a pasture, several miles from my father-in-law's farm... ..sits a *Titan II* missile, poised in its underground silo, hidden from the view of the surrounding Mennonite farmers of that peaceful Kansas community.<sup>252</sup>

He then precedes to describe the history of the Titan II, beginning in 1962, citing a cost of \$4 million dollars per missile, installed, noting that there were some 54 of these weapons, which by

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<sup>250</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1994.)

<sup>251</sup> "Pastors Come and Go" in *The Mennonite*, May 21 1968, 2-A; Theissen, "Franz"

<sup>252</sup> Delton Franz, "Missiles in the Pasture" in *The Mennonite*, June 24, 1969, 423-424.

1969 were already on the “obsolete list” of the Pentagon, and were scheduled to be scrapped by 1973. They were followed by 1400 *Minute Men II* missiles, also located in rural areas. He then moves on to discuss the then current attempt to get Congress to place antiballistic missiles in the countryside, after an uproar from suburban dwellers (where the ABMs were originally supposed to be placed), noting the growing discomfort of some Senators over the looming vote – reluctance he views as an opportunity for peace advocates to press for a slowing of the arms race.<sup>253</sup>

In 1961, as Eisenhower left office, he issued his now famous warning:

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists, and will persist.<sup>254</sup>

Franz uses this opportunity, with a bow to Eisenhower’s 1961 warning, to highlight what he perceived as wasteful spending:

...the ABM issue must be seen in the larger context of Pentagon demands, military boondoggles, and the growing influence of the military-industrial complex which consumes two thirds of our budget and employees one of every ten of our citizens.<sup>255</sup>

After providing numerous statistics, Franz connects this spending to the resultant harm he sees:

This order of priorities prevails at a time when 20 million Americans live in dilapidated, rat-infested housing; when there are... ..at least 10 million victims of malnutrition... ..when there are close to 40 million people living in poverty...<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Franz, “Missiles in the Pasture” 423.

<sup>254</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, Farewell Address, 1961, (accessed, 08/31/2020) <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=90&page=transcript>

<sup>255</sup> Franz, “Missiles in the Pasture” 424.

<sup>256</sup> Franz, “Missiles in the Pasture” 424.



Having laid out the problem as he sees it, he castigates Mennonites for not taking a stand against injustice. Considering the argument that they do not know enough about the issues to be involved he says: “Can men of Christian conscience really dismiss their responsibilities in the midst of unbridled militarism this easily?” He closes with a quote from the book of Ecclesiastes “For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven; ...a time to keep silence and a time to speak...”<sup>257</sup> Franz clearly felt it was time for Mennonites to speak, and at the denominational level, that call was heeded.

In his position as Director of MCC’s Washington Office of National Legislation, Franz officially spoke to Washington DC for both his General Conference as well the Mennonite Church. There were also individuals within the Mennonite Church speaking out on these issues. Perhaps the best known advocate of peace in the Mennonite Church during this era was Guy F. Hershberger. Like Franz, he had been active in the civil rights movement, and also like Franz, he provides a clear example the Anabaptist Vision approach to peace in his denomination. Older than Franz, Hershberger’s involvement in peace concerns began in the 1920s. He was a prominent voice in the Mennonite Church, and as a professor at Goshen he incorporated peace concerns into the curriculum via courses taught, creation of a Peace Society, and by building an extensive peace library at the school. He was an editor at the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, as well as a frequent contributor to the *Gospel Herald*. Hershberger authored a number of books, including *War, Peace, and Nonresistance*. This, his most famous work, was first published in 1944, and then updated in 1953, and again in 1969. *War, Peace, and Nonresistance* hewed fairly closely to traditional Mennonite doctrine, but saw significant circulation among non-Mennonites. Not as widely recognized in non-Mennonite circles was his 1958 work, *The Way of the Cross in*

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<sup>257</sup> Franz, “Missiles in the Pasture” 424; Ecclesiastes 3:1,7.

*Human Relations*. In this work he appears somewhat more open to activism. Hershberger held strongly to the doctrine of non-resistance and was careful to make a distinction between modern secular peace activism and the Christian doctrine of peace, but he was clearly not opposed to speaking out about the injustice caused by war.<sup>258</sup>

In the January 7, 1969 issue of *The Gospel Herald*, in an article entitled “You Are the Salt of the Earth” one gets a sense of Hershberger’s thought on activism. Using a line from Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Hershberger explores what it means to be the salt of the earth. One point that he makes is that to be the salt of the earth means not confusing God’s Kingdom with another. In this section he praises the work of Mennonite workers in Vietnam for their labors, as well as for their refusal “to identify themselves with the program of the American military” as well as the fact that they “have witnessed against that program.” In another section, he asserts that to be the salt of the earth “disciples and the church must be prophetic.” He strongly encourages speaking out against wrong. He looks at examples of this type of prophetic witness against injustice from the Bible, Anabaptist history, Quaker history, and interestingly, then current American culture, making clear the real sacrifice this can entail. “Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated because they spoke out against the evils of their day.” Nor will he allow Mennonites to simply not participate and call that sufficient.<sup>259</sup>

As Christians we must maintain a prophetic voice for that which God would have us proclaim. And we must not be deterred by fear lest some people be disturbed by what we

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<sup>258</sup> Burkholder, “Hershberger”; Guy F. Hershberger, *War, Peace, and Nonresistance* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1944); For an extensive treatment of the life and work of Hershberger, see Theron F. Schlabach, *War, Peace, and Social Conscience: Guy F. Hershberger and Mennonite Ethics* (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 2009) 154; Guy F. Hershberger, *The War of the Cross in Human Relations*, (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 2010).

<sup>259</sup> Guy F. Hershberger, “You Are the Salt of the Earth” in *The Gospel Herald* Vol. 62 No. 1 January 7, 1969, 6-9; Matthew 5:13.

do or say. There is always the temptation to shrink from opposition and be content to “mind our own business.”<sup>260</sup>

Hershberger does not limit himself to Vietnam, either. In addition to war and racism, he tackles a number of other issues that he saw as injustice in American. He is quite outspoken about the issue of gun control, including the registration of guns: “...finally, who is the Christian, *who is the Mennonite*, who does not feel moved to *prophesy to his representative in Congress* concerning this serious matter?” He also tackles the problem of violence on television:

For this reason I think Christians in this TV age have an obligation to *pester the TV industry and the governmental agencies* which regulate it until its programs cease to display violence and to feed the gun culture of our time. The TV and mass media are in need of a generous dose of salt supplied by Christian people.<sup>261</sup>

Clearly, he is raising concerns that would be of little concern to either Mennonite Fundamentalists who would simply say avoid television, or those Mennonites who had been heavily influenced by mainstream American fundamentalism, who might not see guns as such a problem. While perhaps more conservative than Franz, there is clear advocacy in the writings of Hershberger, and it takes the idea of peace well beyond not only non-resistance, but also beyond the war in Vietnam. Together, Franz and Hershberger showcase the officially voiced approach increasingly adopted by their respective denominations – a voice that espoused the Anabaptist Vision.

The late midcentury turmoil revolving round the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War impacted Mennonites, as well as the American public at large. Similar issues were debated across the board, with a variety of different conclusions reached, depending on who you looked to. These issues divided the country, and they divided Mennonites as well. However, whereas

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<sup>260</sup> Hershberger, “You Are the Salt of the Earth,” 8.

<sup>261</sup> Hershberger, “You Are the Salt of the Earth,” 8-9.

the division within the country could be very nasty and contentious (such as at the 1968 Democratic National Convention), the divisions among Mennonites, while just as real, were expressed in a far different manner. As we shall see, there was a period of debate, heated, at least by Mennonite standards, but relatively tame when compared to what was on offer in the culture at large. While the General Conference Mennonite Church continued to house all three groups (Anabaptist Vision, Mennonite Fundamentalism, and Mennonites accepting of mainstream fundamentalism), and as we shall see, the most disgruntled in the Mennonite Church eventually stopped writing letters to the editor and simply left the denomination.

### **Division Among Mennonites**

The growing division between Mennonite Fundamentalists, mainstream American fundamentalist inspired Mennonites, and the Mennonites who promoted the Anabaptist Vision which had become increasingly apparent in response to the civil rights movement and Vietnam had come to a tipping point, at least in the Mennonite Church. In the General Conference group, the two fundamentalist camps had largely ceded the public voice of the denomination to the Anabaptist Vision camp, but once again, thanks to the congregational structure of governance, the two fundamentalist schools of thought were allowed to remain in the denomination largely unbothered. As we saw in the previous section on Vietnam, whatever the prevailing views of denominational leadership, they were careful not to impose specific positions on individual congregations, and as we have seen going all the way back to the draft question in the First World War, General Conference congregations were much more likely to allow individual members to follow the dictates of their own conscious with less formal censure than would have been the case in the Mennonite Church at the same time. It was in many ways a “go along to get along” approach, and it largely saved the General Conference from schism all the way up

through the initial unification at the close of the twentieth century. This was not the case in the Mennonite Church.

The Mennonite Church, despite its uneven historical position of separatism, a position that was strengthened in the denomination under the leadership of Daniel Kauffman, particularly in the 1910s and 1920s, was not oblivious to what was happening in other Mennonite circles, and in the church world at large. Take for example an article in the *Gospel Herald* entitled “Four Threats to Evangelicalism.” This article was written by Frank C. Peters, a member of the Mennonite Brethren Church, a church made up of Low German Mennonites from Russia. This group, at least ethnically, had more in common with the General Conference group, but was more evangelical, and it may be argued, more impacted by fundamentalism than either group – this understood impact, at least as far as Peters is concerned, will be discussed as I continue. The article is clearly written with an eye to current trends in Christendom. It addressed concerns over church growth and decline, and the dangers of following the evangelical model which was showing sharp church growth, even as what he identifies as “liberal” mainline churches were losing numbers. He included many of the authors this work referenced in Chapter 1. Given the sources he cited, he must have been keenly aware of the religious life cycle theory and wanted to remain in the growth portion of the cycle. Concerns about their fate were clearly on the minds of people in the Mennonite Church.<sup>262</sup>

The first threat Peters tackles is what he calls shallow discipleship. In this section he uses the borrowed phrase “cheap grace” – the notion that personal salvation does not require anything of the recipient. He goes on to talk about “the sanctifying effect of suffering, cross bearing, and

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<sup>262</sup> Frank C. Peters, “Four Threats to Evangelicalism” in *Gospel Herald* July 30, 1974, 579-580.

obedience.” The implication is that the Christian life requires sacrifice. While the type of sacrifice envisioned by Peters would probably be different than they would see it, this idea would be well received by the most conservative elements of the Mennonite Church – those who were concerned about maintaining distinctions in dress and amusement – issues that would continue to plague the group until the most conservative left the denomination. The second danger addresses uncritical patriotism. He has something to offer all the camps in this section, it is just a matter of emphasis on the part of the reader. He warns that “Entire movements have dedicated themselves to the restoration of the ‘American way of life.’” This would be completely unacceptable for the Anabaptist Vision camp, as well as the Mennonite Fundamentalists. Take these lines for example, where he addressed the rise of the religious right:

With the threat of atheistic communism on every hand, the danger of an evangelical counterrevolution may lead to an uncritical allegiance to the sinful right... ...Christians ought to be concerned about a Christian presence in government but this concern dare not impede prophetic criticism of the state.<sup>263</sup>

The Mennonite Fundamentalists might have had some concern about “atheistic communism,” but it would be limited to allowing the state to take care of it without interference. There will be more on this school of thought in the pages to come. It is really the American influenced fundamentalist Mennonites that would stress this fear. They were not a major component of the Mennonite Church, but they were in the General Conference and Mennonite Brethren (of which Peters is a member) groups. The Anabaptist Vision advocates would hone in on the need for “prophetic criticism of the state” something neither camp of fundamentalists would espouse. The Mennonite Fundamentalists would clearly understand the concern about a Christian presence in government, so concerned in fact they would likely stay aloof.

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<sup>263</sup> Peters, “Four Threats,” 580.

The third concern of Peters was what he called the evangelical ghetto. He understood this to mean a retreat into self that could lead to “privatism and isolation.” He says:

One of the problems of evangelical ghettoism is that the church becomes excessively introspective and soon falls victim to the legalism of taboos in which the visible marks of separation receive undue emphasis.<sup>264</sup>

Anabaptist Vision proponents would read this and immediately think of the Mennonite Fundamentalists. They in turn, would read this and see this as a call to abandon separation, and view that as the “shallow discipleship” Peters avowed earlier in the piece.

The author ends by addressing what he calls an incomplete gospel. He criticizes evangelicals for failing to see social justice as a part of Christ’s call on the lives of his followers:

Social service done in the name of Christ is an integral part of the mission of the church. We are not only called to a life of proclamation and piety but are to glorify our Christ in service of our neighbor.... Social service is a fruit and evidence of our faith but it is also a preparation for the proclamation of the gospel.<sup>265</sup>

Proponents of the Anabaptist Vision would agree whole heartedly with this assessment as a vindication of their activism, while the Mennonite Fundamentalists would likely point out their work with the Fresh Air Program for inner city children as an example that the idea of maintaining separation, particularly in dress, did not preclude social service. American inspired fundamentalist Mennonites would view proselytization as the primary goal and view social activism with a wary eye. While this group was not strong in the Mennonite Church, it was in both the General Conference and the Mennonite Brethren tradition of the author.

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<sup>264</sup> Peters, “Four Threats,” 580.

<sup>265</sup> Peters, “Four Threats,” 580.

This article is significant for a number of reasons, not the least of which is in showcasing how Mennonites reading the same material could come away with such divergent views. It also hints to at least a somewhat ecumenical view on the part of the editors of the *Gospel Herald*. Their willingness to publish a piece originally run in a Mennonite publication tied to a denomination with different polity and ethnic background hints at the move toward merging with the General Conference Mennonite Church that will gain increasing support in the following decades. Despite the willingness of the denominational hierarchy to be more open to Mennonites of other traditions with potentially divergent ideas, not all in the Mennonite Church were thrilled.

Carl Wesselhoeft of Ohio summed up the views of the more conservative element of the Mennonite Church in the “Readers Say” section of the *Gospel Herald* a few months later when he wrote:

Are we becoming more and more sophisticated, looking on fundamentalism with disdain as alien to our Mennonite Heritage? There are aspects of fundamentalism we should reject. However, the basic premise of fundamentalism is not its militarism and nationalism but its view of the Scriptures, the atonement, the whole work of God in redeeming mankind... ...[Anabaptists] emphasis on ethics was not an end of itself but grew out of a deep sense of personal salvation in Christ.<sup>266</sup>

The line “ethics was not an end of itself” is a thinly veiled jab at the social activism of the Anabaptist Vision position that was coming to dominate the leadership of the Mennonite Church in the latter half of the twentieth century. Here in 1976, we have a piece that uses the same theological arguments that Daniel Kauffman used in the 1910s and 1920s. It is simply an adoption of parts of mainstream fundamentalism grafted on to the doctrines of separation and

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<sup>266</sup> Carl Wesselhoeft, “Readers Say” in *Gospel Herald* November 23, 1976, 919.



nonresistance. The irritation of Mennonite Fundamentalists with the direction of the leadership is clear, and it hints at continuing defections from the Mennonite Church.

Several sizable congregations had already departed by the time Wesselhoeft wrote his letter. Some congregations in the Pacific Coast Conference of the Mennonite Church had broken away in the mid 1960s due to what they saw as a liberalizing drift in the denomination. A bit later, several congregations in both the Franconia and Lancaster Conferences (among the most conservative in the Mennonite Church) withdrew from the denomination for similar reasons, forming the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church, a group with a strong emphasis on traditional separation. This group maintains head covering for women, relies on an unsalaried ministry, and does not allow radio, television, or participation in organized sports. They will not accept divorce and remarriage, and they do not send their children to public schools. With the departure of such congregations and conferences, it is not difficult to understand how the Mennonite Church changed significantly after midcentury. And while Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church is on the more extreme end of conservatism, they were not the only defectors.<sup>267</sup>

In 1983, the Fellowship of Concerned Mennonites was formed. Still active, the About Us section on this group's website nicely summarizes the reasons behind the withdrawal of conservative members from the Mennonite Church:

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<sup>267</sup> Harold S. Bender and Beulah Stauffer Hostetler. "Mennonite Church (MC)" *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. (accesses July 22, 2020) [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite\\_Church\\_\(MC\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite_Church_(MC)); Jesse Neuenschwander, "Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church" *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. (accessed July 22, 2020) [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Eastern\\_Pennsylvania\\_Mennonite\\_Church](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Eastern_Pennsylvania_Mennonite_Church)

The Fellowship has been called into being because certain of those basic biblical tenets of faith long held as foundational currently are being questioned, modified, even negated, and, because, by general acknowledgement, the Mennonite Church membership contains a wide range of conservative elements on the one hand, and liberal elements on the other, with the latter seemingly gaining the ascendancy, and, because at issue is the control of thought through the schools and through the publication of literature, and, because in the present confusion of ideas there is need for a *fundamental*, distinctive, *uniform*, and consistent expression of faith.<sup>268</sup>

In this same section the group lists the affirmations necessary to join the fellowship. These include:

the blood atonement of Christ, the inerrancy of Scripture, the biblical account of creation and the scriptural teaching of the sanctity of life, of marriage, of human sexuality, and the prohibition of homosexuality and lesbianism.<sup>269</sup>

This partial list includes many of the same themes the original fundamentalists from the turn of the century espoused. It also includes some issues that became prominent in the latter part of the twentieth century (abortion) and the early twenty-first century (sexuality and gender) – issues that will be discussed in following chapters.

Before moving on to the General Conference, I will examine an article on the website of The Sword and Trumpet, a periodical that was founded in 1929 by conservatives in the Mennonite Church, and that continues to serve many who have left the Mennonite Church. This article deals with capital punishment, something Anabaptist Vision followers actively oppose, and some American inspired fundamentalist Mennonites support. This article shows how Mennonite Fundamentalists deal with the issue. They have this to say:

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<sup>268</sup> “About Us” Concerned Mennonite Fellowship” (accessed July 22, 2020) <https://fcminformer.org/about-us/>

<sup>269</sup> “About Us.”

We maintain that capital punishment is a legitimate exercise of the authority and power of civil government. Any attempt on the part of the church to deny that right to the state is unfortunate and indefensible.<sup>270</sup>

On the surface this seems like an odd position for a group committed to nonresistance and nonviolence. They justify the position thusly: God is the giver of life and he can also take it. God may delegate that right to whom he chooses. In the “new dispensation,” a favorite concept among fundamentalists of both stripes, the church and state are separate. It is as if to say, we do not promote capital punishment, but it is the state’s God-given prerogative, and we need to mind our own business. This is the rationale that allows them to pay taxes to a government at war, and deal with a host of other issues. It is also the reason they were critical of activism on the part of advocates of the Anabaptist Vision during the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War.<sup>271</sup>

Having looked at the division in the Mennonite Church in the period during and after Vietnam, I would like to briefly look at the General Conference, which was also divided in thought and practice, but did not face the defections experienced in the Mennonite Church. The General Conference was able to hold the Anabaptist Vision, Mennonite Fundamentalism, and the American inspired mainstream fundamentalism of some Mennonites in tension. The issues that divided the various factions did not lead to schism, but they were at times discussed. In the 1970s J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder undertook a statistical survey of Mennonites in North America, which was published as a book entitled *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later* which

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<sup>270</sup> “Capital Punishment Back in Focus” The Sword and Trumpet. (accessed July 21, 2020)  
<https://swordandtrumpet.org/2017/07/26/capital-punishment-back-in-focus/>

<sup>271</sup> “Capital Punishment.”

analyzed the views of Mennonites (and one Brethren denomination) on social, political, and religious issues. This study and the resultant book generated debate in *The Mennonite*.<sup>272</sup>

In reviewing the study shortly after publication, Jim Juhnke, a Mennonite historian from the General Conference tradition, made some important observations. Juhnke felt the results pointed to some alarming trends, among them, the fact that between 10 and 20 percent of the respondent did not subscribe to what he considered basic Anabaptist doctrines such as separation of church and state, non-swearing of oaths, and nonresistance, among others. Juhnke explains that the authors of the study see fundamentalism as the single greatest threat to Anabaptism in the United States:

...Fundamentalist doctrine among Mennonites (such as the six-day creation, eternal punishment, literalism) is quite strong... The problem is that belief in the uniquely Fundamentalist doctrines is associated with non Anabaptist principles... ‘Our data empirically demonstrated that Fundamentalist orthodoxy undermines the pacifist commitment, racial tolerance, a forced social witness by Christians, concern for the welfare for the poor’ ...<sup>273</sup>

He allows that these conclusions are controversial, and that some Mennonites will disagree. But it becomes clear that Juhnke is on the side of the Anabaptist Vision, even as he acknowledges the strength of mainstream American fundamentalism in the General Conference Mennonite Church: “Hundreds of thousands of Mennonite tax dollars went to support the war in Vietnam, but Mennonites were more critical of the war protestors than they were of official government lies.” Mennonite Fundamentalists, harder to identify in the General Conference would not likely worry about the tax money nor care too much about the lies. Mennonites of an American style

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<sup>272</sup> John D. Harder and James C. Juhnke. "Harder, Leland David (1926-2013)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. (accessed July 22, 2020) [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Harder,\\_Leland\\_David\\_\(1926-2013\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Harder,_Leland_David_(1926-2013)); J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later* Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1975.

<sup>273</sup> Jim Juhnke, “Anabaptists Then and Now” in *The Mennonite* Vol 90 No 9, May 13, 1975, 298-300.

fundamentalist bent would likely be vocally critical of war protestors while supporting the use of their tax money to defend against the communist threat. Indeed, General Conference men served in that war, among others.<sup>274</sup>

Juhnke's critical stance against fundamentalism did not go unchallenged. Erland Waltner, president of Mennonite Biblical Seminary took Juhnke to task for his depiction of the fundamentalist believer:

In his section which he calls "Fundamentalism," the writer resorts to an unscientific and unloving way of dealing with a problem, namely, stereotyping. He uses the same labels which were used in the sordid church controversies of my youth (1920-1935) when so-called Fundamentalists and so called Modernists were out to get each other.<sup>275</sup>

Waltner goes on to say that he owes much to his fundamentalist friends, and treasured the time he spent at Wheaton College, a strong proponent of fundamentalism, and an institution that he felt had been unflatteringly mentioned by Juhnke, before closing with regards toward Juhnke with whom he is engaged in what he identifies as a family style "love-fight."<sup>276</sup> Once again, in true Mennonite fashion, effort is made to remain cordial even in disagreement.

Others in the General Conference group questioned the value of the study itself. Take for example, Dave Kroeker's article "Scaling the CMP Mountain: Was it worth the effort?" He begins with this statement: "Personally, I flinch at the thought of scientific analysis of beliefs and attitude" before out of hand opposing questionnaires for such purposes. Here too, even as he criticizes the study, he takes a shot at the impact of fundamentalism, claiming: "Another interesting fact is the more Fundamentalistic people's beliefs are, the less their knowledge of the

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<sup>274</sup> Juhnke, "Anabaptists" 299.

<sup>275</sup> Erland Waltner, "Unscientific and Unloving" in *The Mennonite* Vol 90 No 24, June 17, 1975, 390.

<sup>276</sup> Erland Waltner, "Unscientific and Unloving," 391.

Bible.” All of this to say, that while they did not split off from the denomination, there were widely varying opinions in the General Conference, perhaps even more so than in the Mennonite Church. Although outwardly similar, the two denominations remained different in some significant ways when they began to consider unification.

There was small numerical growth in the Mennonite Church in this period – in the United States baptized members of the group numbered 70,513 in 1956, compared with 97,328 in 1997. None-the-less, given such slow numerical growth, coupled with the defections at both the congregational and conference level, a clear argument can be made that the Mennonite Church was nearing the stage of decline. Growth in this period in the General Conference Mennonite Church was even slower, growing from 31,687 members in 1950 to only 35,333 in 1997. Given that this group had not suffered major congregational or conference level defections like the Mennonite Church, the argument for decline in the General Conference is even stronger. As Finke and Stark have pointed out, denominations in decline often do combine, and as we shall see, that is what the Mennonite Church and the smaller General Conference Mennonite Church did.<sup>277</sup>

### **Path to Unification**

By the end of the 1980s, Mennonites in both groups, and in the Mennonite Church, especially, were very different than they had been at the start of the century. In many ways, at least without entering into a theological discussion, or knowledge of their surnames, one would be hard-pressed to identify a member of either denomination on sight. This seeming similarity is

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<sup>277</sup> Finke and Stark, *Churching of America*, 228-234; Bender and Hosteter, “Mennonite Church (MC)”; Kauffman and Poettcker, “General Conference Mennonite Church (GCM)”

the result of a number of factors. Among the General Conference group, issues of dress had seldom been a mark of distinction. In their case, issues of language, especially among the Russian/Low Germans which comprised a large percentage of the General Conference Mennonite Church, had been the most immediately recognizable distinction. By the end of the twentieth century, that was no longer the case. Another major distinction was the insistence on conscientious objector status during war. In the all-out war efforts of World War I and World War II this served as a noticeable point of difference. As time wore on, the nonresistance position morphed, and in some cases ceased to be a concern. With additional ways to avoid being drafted in Vietnam, combined with a more mainstream peace movement, this too became less of a distinctive for members of the General Conference group, even if they remained nonresistant. With the end of the draft, it had ceased to be a major issue for many, at least as a noticeable mark of distinction.

Within the Mennonite Church, the loss of a noticeable separation was also evident, but for a different set of reasons. Language was not an issue in this group, even in the early twentieth century. Dress, on the other hand, had been. There had always been an element of distinctive dress within the group, though its application was piecemeal, and not evenly distributed regionally. Early in the century, that changed, and by the 1920s a dress code had developed that was just short of a uniform. While there were certainly problems regarding conscientious objector status, these were less pronounced in the Mennonite Church for reasons already discussed. The major reason that members of this group looked so much like the mainstream public as the twentieth century drew to a close was due to the defection of their more conservative elements – Mennonite Fundamentalists. Those most concerned with visual separation – i.e. distinctive dress – left the denomination. When they departed, not only did

members of the Mennonite Church become less visibly distinct, but they also became less conservative theologically, as fundamentalism, particularly of the Mennonite variety, and plain dress had often gone hand in hand.

Ervin Stutzman has named the unwillingness to fight or challenge opposing views as the “Mennonite Syndrome.” This is one of the primary reasons for the loss of distinctiveness in the Mennonite Church. He characterized the conservative traditionalists – subscribers to what Paul Toews has labeled Mennonite Fundamentalism – as “victims” of this syndrome. Stutzman asserts that it is a twofold issue. In the first place, the reluctance to openly challenge those who have differing views led the conservatives to simply stop trying to steer the denomination, and to converse only with those Mennonites who agreed with their position, effectively abdicating denominational leadership to the progressive wing of the church – followers of the Anabaptist Vision. Secondly is an issue that has the potential to touch both sides of the argument, and that is the general feeling of uncomfortableness Mennonites have in discussing issues of power. It is difficult to challenge a power structure when you are unwilling to openly and realistically acknowledge that it exists. This “Mennonite Syndrome,” coupled with the increasingly autonomous nature of the Mennonite Church (though hardly autonomous to the degree of the General Conference group), almost guaranteed the departure of the most conservative elements of the group.<sup>278</sup>

In keeping with this Mennonite tradition of avoiding prolonged, continuous conflict, the traditionalists began to leave the Mennonite Church in a way reminiscent of the first period in Kniss’s analysis of the conflict in the Mennonite Church. This departure of the Mennonite

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<sup>278</sup> Stutzman, “From Nonresistance to Peace and Justice: Mennonite Peace Rhetoric, 1951-1991.” PhD. Dissertation. Temple University, 1993, 239-241.



Fundamentalists was accomplished in two ways. In what was referred to as the “nonconference movement,” individual Mennonite congregations withdrew from their regional Mennonite Church conference when they determined that it had become too liberal. The other way in which this was accomplished was through a number of conservative congregations coming together to create new, more conservative regional conferences that were no longer affiliated with the Mennonite Church. This is clearly seen in both the formation of the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church and the Fellowship of Concerned Mennonites which were discussed earlier in the chapter. By 1985, most of the more conservative holdouts had left the Mennonite Church in a fairly amicable fashion. Thus, Mennonite Fundamentalism was not the force to be reckoned with that it had been a decade or two before. The Mennonite Church looked very different in the late 1980s than it had in the 1940s, or even late 1960s. At the same time, it had gradually become a bit more congregationally governed as opposed to the more structured episcopal style that had been promoted by Daniel Kauffman, though the image of an authoritarian style lingered, particularly in the minds of some in the General Conference denomination as we shall see. This movement away from a deeply centralized approach, long a source of difference between the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite church not only made it easier for conservative elements in the Mennonite Church to depart, but no doubt eased the eventual merger of the two denominations. Again, by this time, most members of the Mennonite Church were indistinguishable, at least in terms of dress and technology, from the general population. By the 1990s, the position on nonresistance in the Mennonite Church was almost identical to the modern secular peace movement.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Kniss, 40-62, 84-106; Stuzman, *From Nonresistance to Justice*, 122-124, 189-190.

In addition, the Anabaptist Vision inspired Mennonite identity, closely tied to the peace and justice movement, was solidified by the 1990s. Mennonite publishers were turning out a plethora of peace and justice books, and Mennonites were publishing such books through other publishing houses as well. Take for example a handful of titles from the era taken from the recommended reading list of the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center. The strength of the position is clear even from the titles of these works, and they span a wide range of topics from international to congregational and personal. David Augsburg's *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures: Pathways and Patterns* is not simply the "don't go to war when it comes" of Mennonite Fundamentalism, it is actively going into conflict in other cultures with the intent of *making* peace. And these works do not just focus on theory – some had hands-on training in mind, such as *The Roleplay Book: 41 Hypothetical Situations*, which was intended for use for fine tuning mediation skills in a course taught at the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center. *Let's Talk: Communication Skills and Conflict Transformation* is intended for Sunday School curriculum for teens and adults.<sup>280</sup> These examples show not only that peace was on the minds of Mennonite leaders of the 1990s, but that their vision for peace had shifted from simple nonresistance to an expanded notion of peacemaking beyond merely preventing war and came all the way down to the congregational and individual levels.

While most rank-and-file members of the Mennonite Church may not have been actively, directly, engaged in social justice advocacy, with the departure of the more conservative Mennonite Fundamentalists, they were supporting church agencies that were involved in active,

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<sup>280</sup> Lombard Mennonite Peace Center, "Recommended Reading," (accessed July 21, 2020) <https://lmpeacecenter.org/recommended-reading/> ; Augsburg, David *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures: Pathways and Patterns* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); Ron Mock, ed. *The Roleplay Book: 41 Hypothetical Situations* (Akron PA: Mennonite Conciliation Service, 1997); Barry C. Bartel, *Let's Talk: Communication Skills and Conflict Transformation* Newton KS: Faith and Life Press, 1999.

direct advocacy. At the same time, most members of the Mennonite Church would have supported the position that social and political actions were among the legitimate duties of Christians. Strangely enough, though the Mennonite Church proper opposed the First Persian Gulf War of the early 1990's, some in Mennonite circles supported, or at least accepted it, as a means of rescuing Kuwait, and allowing relief work to go forward and to alleviate suffering.<sup>281</sup> Though there was shifting, the Mennonite Church clearly had not abandoned the pacifist aspect of the peace doctrine. This seemingly odd turn of events simply indicates that the traditional peace doctrine, not unlike most facets of the Mennonite experience, is not static and is constantly being renegotiated.

The ascendancy of the peace doctrine was not limited to the Mennonite Church. It had taken center stage in the General Conference Mennonite Church as well, with Leo Driedger asserting that the General Conference group was the stronger of the two on peace activism by 1990. While the pacifist component of the peace doctrine remained strong in the Mennonite Church, it received much less emphasis in the General Conference, with peace activism being more prevalent. There is likely a cultural component at play.<sup>282</sup>

As has previously been mentioned, the General Conference Mennonite Church has a large presence of Dutch/Low German members. When compared to the Swiss/High Germans Mennonite Church, Low Germans have historically been much more engaged in the marketplace, with a much higher rate of interaction with those outside their tradition. Though they were separated by language while in Russia, they were nonetheless more politically and socially active

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<sup>281</sup> Stutzman, *From Nonresistance to Justice*, 321; J.R. Burkholder and Ted Koontz, "When Armed Force is Used to Make Relief Work Possible" *Gospel Herald* Vol 86, January 12, 1993, 6-7.

<sup>282</sup> Leo Driedger, *Mennonites in the Global Village* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000,) 231-232.

than many in the Mennonite Church in America in the nineteenth century. It is only natural that they, and by extension, the denomination where they predominated, would be more comfortable actively engaging the government on issues of peace.

As we saw in Chapter 4, most of the more vocal supporters of African American civil rights among Mennonites came from this group. The fact that the Dutch/Low Germans experienced greater persecution for their pacifism may also figure into the equation.<sup>283</sup> It must also be remembered, that unlike the Mennonite Church, the most conservative elements of the General Conference group, both those who opposed advocacy while promoting nonresistance – the General Conference version of Mennonite Fundamentalism, as well as those opposed to both – the Mennonites in the group who had accepted mainstream American style fundamentalism, remained in the denomination. This meant that when the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church merged at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the General Conference group would bring in a group with more diversity of thought and opinion compared to the Mennonite Church. This is not to say that the Mennonite Church was monolithic in belief and practice, but simply that they represented less diversity overall. When congregations, and even regional conferences began to fall away from the newly created denomination in the second decade of the new century, it became clear that even with the departure of the most conservative Mennonite Fundamentalists two decades prior, congregations in the former Mennonite Church were not in lockstep.

In July of 1989, the Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church – both binational denominations – began exploring the possibility of a merger. The possibility

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<sup>283</sup> Driedger, *Mennonites in the Global Village*, 231-232; Horn, “Acculturation” XX.

became a major topic of discussion almost immediately. There were at least a dozen articles and letters devoted to the issue surrounding the possible unification of the two groups in *The Mennonite*, the General Conference Mennonite Church publication, in 1989 alone, and more than twice that number during the same year in the Mennonite Church's *Gospel Herald*. Initial responses were mixed. Perhaps one of the most vocally cautious about a merger, at least initially, was Merle Good of the Mennonite Church. Good, who is a novelist, along with his wife Phyllis, edited *Festival Quarterly*, a literary magazine that showcased poetry and prose from Mennonite writers. The couple also operate Peoples Place, which serves as an Amish and Mennonite heritage center in Lancaster Pennsylvania. In the July 25, 1989 *Gospel Herald*, Good authored a piece entitled "Cautions About Merger" in which he laid out why some were in favor of unification, as well as several reservations he had about the idea.<sup>284</sup>

Good opened his opinion piece with the following words:

In the current cordiality surrounding the courtship between the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church, one hesitates to raise any cautions. The marriage appears so inevitable to some that it could seem rude to interrupt the music and ask questions... Yet questions do linger.

The author admits to skepticism about the merger, and then accuses the General Conference group of having "a much stronger disposition toward denominationalism than those in the Mennonite Church" and proceeds to explain his view that denominationalism leads to a greater distance between laity and leadership. (The wide variety of views allowed within the General

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<sup>284</sup> Mennonite Church USA, "Denominational Organization," (accessed May 13, 2019) [http://mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Intro\\_to\\_MCUSA\\_Overview\\_2018pc.pdf](http://mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Intro_to_MCUSA_Overview_2018pc.pdf); Kerry Strayer, "Structural Change and Cultural Continuity: The Movement Toward Integration in Two Mennonite Denominations, PhD. Diss., University of Texas, 1995, 281-285; Ann Hostetler, "Literature, North American Mennonite (1960s-2010s)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. (accessed July 22, 2020) [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Literature,\\_North\\_American\\_Mennonite\\_\(1950-1985\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Literature,_North_American_Mennonite_(1950-1985)); Merle Good, "Cautions About Merger" in *Gospel Herald* July 25, 1989, 532-534.

Conference group has already been noted and may be an example of Good's concern here.) He then goes on into a rather murky discussion of "liberals" and "conservatives" and makes the still current claim that liberals are no more open minded than conservatives, and that at least conservatives do not pretend otherwise. Before his laundry list of potential problems, Good identifies four groups he views as being most in favor of a merger: 1) People in regions where both denominations are common and who may believe it will make their work more effective would promote a merger. 2) Denominational leaders on both sides who might think it a better use of limited financial resources would find it appealing. 3) Dual conference (both MC and GC affiliated) congregations would strongly support the move as they have in a sense already begun the work. 4) Finally, Canadian Mennonite leaders who would see such a merger as a component in a similar move in their nation would also be supportive.<sup>285</sup>

Having laid out his understanding of the proponents of unification efforts, he then lists ten specific cautions about such a merger. These include the following: 1) It would not increase membership in the long term, with the multiple smaller more conservative groups, when combined, being larger than the unified group. (As we shall see in Chapter 6, this was born out in reality.) 2) It would serve as a vehicle for the liberal elements in both denominations to unite forces, so to speak. 3) It would lead to an erosion of core beliefs. Good also points to different approaches to governing structure between the two groups, though it does not really pertain to the point he is making in the third argument. 4) Differing opinions on the peace doctrine presented problems, with the Mennonite Church viewing conscientious objection as "expected" while the General Conference viewed it as "optional." This too is an issue that I have explored in this work, and it shows the strength of mainstream American style fundamentalism in the

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<sup>285</sup> Good, "Cautions," 533.

General Conference denomination. 5) General Conference members were drawn to what they saw as the “stability” of the Mennonite Church, to which he responds with a summary of problems within the Mennonite Church that would counter such an image. 6) Arguments about healing a rift are largely fictional. Few members/congregations of the General Conference come from the mid-nineteenth century “rift” that created the General Conference Mennonite Church. Most General Conference Mennonites are a product of the reformation in the Low Countries (Dutch/Low German/Russian background) and most members of the Mennonite Church are a product of the reformation in Switzerland (Swiss/High German background.) This shows clearly the strength of the “ethnic” identity component in Mennonite circles even at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. 7) The merger was too narrow in scope – if unity was the real goal, why not all Mennonites everywhere? 8) The merger was a way for the Mennonite Church to change the topic about their failure to become multiracial, a topic discussed at length in Chapter 4 of the current work. 9) The divisiveness of the Mennonite Church (often unacknowledged) would only be exacerbated by such a merger. 10) And finally, Good claims unity and renewal do not necessitate a formal merger. Good does not paint a flattering picture of Mennonites, especially his own Mennonite Church, but he does point out issues that have been explored in this work. He also identified issues that would result when the unification became a reality at the turn of the century.<sup>286</sup>

Responses in the Mennonite Church to Good’s piece were mixed. Some such as Clarence Y. Fretz supported Good’s position. In the September 5, 1989 issue of the *Gospel Herald* letters section he wrote:

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<sup>286</sup> Good, “Cautions,”534.

I also wish to affirm Merle Good's careful presentation "Cautions About the Merger" (July 25). "Marry in haste, repent at leisure." "How can two walk together, except they agree?" Especially if not agreed on basic matters such as participation or nonparticipation in military service.<sup>287</sup>

Again, Fretz is pointing out how nonresistance was fading as a core doctrine among some General Conference Mennonites, clearly showing the inroads of mainstream fundamentalism in that group. Others, however, found Good's arguments less persuasive.

In the next issue of the *Gospel Herald*, James Schrag examines some of Good's assumptions in his piece "A Reply to Merle Good on Merger." Schrag was the pastor of a dual affiliation congregation, part of a group Good identified as a major proponent of unification. He applauds Good not only for his exploration of relevant topics, but also for identifying his roots in the (very conservative) Lancaster Conference of the Mennonite Church. He then proceeds to challenge some of Good's conclusions. He claims that if the General Conference "thinks" denominationally, the Mennonite Church "acts" denominationally. He also takes him to task for his use of the terms "liberal" and "conservative" – not one of Good's clearest arguments to begin with. Says Schrag: "These terms are no longer adequate to describe the complexity of Mennonite differences and now serve to perpetuate myth and prejudice." He also claims that Good misrepresents the General Conference position on nonresistance as "optional." Though not convinced on this point, Schrag does concede the more congregational nature of the General Conference group when discussing this topic. Returning to the wedding metaphor the author ends the piece with the following:

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<sup>287</sup> Clarence Y. Fretz, "Letters" in *Gospel Herald* September 5, 1989, 643.



Good has done the church a service in his willingness to ask questions. We need more of his kind. The counseling before marriage must be thorough! But we must proceed with a spirit of faith and hope along with our caution.<sup>288</sup>

Response in the General Conference group, as seen in *The Mennonite* were similar in nature. For example, Bluffton professor Howard Raid echoed Good as he argued that the General Conference Mennonites and the Mennonite Church were from different backgrounds. He went on to say that because of that, they had developed differently, with the General Conference being the freer of the two. While he claims that both groups have the same basic beliefs, he does not make a clear commitment for or against unification. Dennis Webber, pastor of a General Conference Mennonite Church in Montana, seemed to oppose a merger. He says:

I am all in favor of local cooperation and ministry, as we do here with the MCs. However, on the national level, the GC needs to get its house in order and return to biblical, evangelical beliefs and practices before we make any new moves (James 4:7-10).<sup>289</sup>

Webber, like Good, claims that there can be unity and cooperation without a formal merger, and also like Good, he is not hesitant to criticize what he sees as failings in his own denomination. The scripture he references deals with resisting the devil and repentance. While it is not possible to know specifically what was on his mind, it is easy to see the variety of positions in the General Conference Mennonite Church. Were they to repent of military service as the low -profile Mennonite fundamentalists in the group would say? Were they to repent of their lack of peace activism as the Anabaptist Vision folks would say? (Not likely as he seems to criticize the denominational leadership which encouraged but did not require a strong peace witness.) Or

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<sup>288</sup> James Schrag "A Reply to Merle Good on Merger" in *Gospel Herald* September 12, 1989, 652-653.

<sup>289</sup> Howard Raid, "Integration of What?" in *The Mennonite* Vol 104 No 1 January 10, 1989, 21; Dennis Webber, "Integration of What?" in *The Mennonite* Vol 104 No 1 January 10, 1989, 21.

were they to repent of their liberal leaning activism that gave comfort and aid to communists, as the mainstream American fundamentalist inspired Mennonites would say?

Others, such as Rudi Theissen, clearly favored the merger: “Jesus has only one church... The sooner we break down the walls the better.” Tim Nussbaum seems to contradict the importance of difference in background and practice: “I have never been able to separate the people according to church affiliation. We seem to have more in common than anything that separates us.” Kim and Jacqui Krahn had this to say about the possibility of a merger between the two groups:

We believe the unification of the General Conference and Mennonite Church is in keeping with the church’s mandate of being “one body.” Perhaps in the joining of our historically divergent conferences we can lay to rest some of the ethnocentric baggage that has come to characterize what should be our faith and together address issues more important than our differences.

While not ignoring the differences in polity and ethnicity, the Krahns propose unification to bridge those differences – differences they see as detrimental to faith and outreach.<sup>290</sup>

In 1993, an Integration Exploration Committee began sending out questionnaires to gauge the level of interest and support for a potential merger of the two denominations to members of both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church. Response rates were about 12%. While this may sound low, it is within the generally acceptable range of responses for such mailed surveys. It can be argued that those with strong opinions – either for or against – would be the most likely to respond, and the most important constituents in the potential success or failure of such a venture. The results were compiled and shared with the

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<sup>290</sup> Rudi Theissen, “Integration of What?” in *The Mennonite* Vol 104 No 1 January 10, 1989, 21; Tim Nussbaum “Integration of What?” in *The Mennonite* Vol 104 No 1 January 10, 1989, 21; Kim Krahn and Jacqui Krahn “Integration of What?” in *The Mennonite* Vol 104 No 1 January 10, 1989, 21.

two denominations in 1994, and they were generally positive toward unification. Dual affiliated “mission” congregations (church plants, mostly in urban areas, jointly supported by both denominations) were the most favorably disposed with a positive response of over 70%. Hardly surprising, as both supporters and opponents of merging identified this group as likely to support such a move. Among General Conference groups, the approval ratings were over 60%, with over 50% of Mennonite Church respondents indicating support for continuing with the possibility of a merger.<sup>291</sup>

Again, given the general notion that the General Conference was more “progressive” than the Mennonite Church, their higher level of willingness is not surprising. There was little evidence of strong opposition to a merger, with most of that coming from Mennonite Church respondents, but even here the number of opponents was low with those registering strong opposition at less than 15% of respondents. In light of the survey results, as the IEC began serious consideration of how a merger might be made, they began to look for models they might emulate or adapt. One model they looked closely at was the late 1980s merger that created the Presbyterian Church USA from two regionally separate groups – the Presbyterian Church in the United States (traditionally southern) and the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (traditionally northern.)<sup>292</sup> While looking at such a merger had its uses, these Presbyterian groups did not have the same differences in polity, and as we shall see, that difference would loom larger after the merger.

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<sup>291</sup> Mennonite Church USA, “Denominational Organization”; Mennonite Church Canada, “A Brief History of Mennonites in Canada,” (accessed May 13, 2019) <http://home.mennonitechurch.ca/Origins>; Strayer, “Structural Change,” 281-285.

<sup>292</sup> Mennonite Church USA, “Denominational Organization,”: “A Brief History of Mennonites in Canada”; Strayer, “Structural Change,” 281-285.

Even in the 1990s, real barriers to merging the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church remained. History matters, and the history of the two denominations was different. Even their interpretations of their varied histories differed. James Juhnke, in some ways the de facto historian of Mennonites during the 1970s and 1980s, at least from a General Conference perspective, stressed the importance of institution building, while his Mennonite Church counterpart, Theron Schlabach, dismissed institution building as incidental to the Mennonite experience, focusing on an earlier period, claiming community was the heart of the Mennonite experience. As supporters and opponents of the merger made clear in their denominational publications, there were real difference between the two groups. Most members of the Mennonite Church were descendants of settlers who had come to North America prior to the Enlightenment, while the ancestors of the Dutch/Low German Mennonites came after exposure to Enlightenment ideas. In his 1989 *None But Saints*, James Urry explores how Low German Mennonites navigated the changing social, economic, and political conditions in nineteenth-century Russia in ways that the Swiss/High German Mennonites in the United States had not been forced to, explaining not only the way the Russian Mennonites divided, but also showing how their European experiences were unique. Though founded by Swiss/High Germans who broke away from the Mennonite Church, the majority of General Conference Mennonite Church members were of Low German/Russian descent (an estimate 2/3 in 1978.) Kerry Strayer, a professor at Otterbein University, whose dissertation focused on the unification process that led to the creation of the Mennonite Church USA, has posited this as a reason for a more liberal and open General Conference and a more authoritarian and closed Mennonite Church. As has been mentioned, the Mennonite Church had become somewhat less top down in structure in the later twentieth century – though not nearly as autonomous as the General Conference. Those views

about differences in polity were still held to in the later part of the twentieth century and they could have very easily prevented the merging of the two groups. This was a topic that many writers to both the *Gospel Harold* and *The Mennonite* addressed, as we have seen.<sup>293</sup>

Besides that, there were logistical concerns. The very practical issue of what to do about denominational colleges remained. It often happened that both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference had institutions of higher learning in close proximity to one another. How was that to be handled? Would one close? Would they merge? Would both be supported? Who would decide? There was understandable concern about possible closures in the event of a merger. Despite such fears, institutions of higher education from both original denominations are still operational, under the banner of the Mennonite Church USA, two decades into the unification, even when in close proximity. For example, Bethel College (originally GC) in North Newton, Kansas, and Heston College (originally MC) in Heston, Kansas, are both still operating, even though both are part of the Mennonite Church USA, and less than 10 miles apart.

Other concerns might also have prevented a union of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church. A merger of the two denominations was anything but guaranteed, and yet by the dawn of the twenty-first century, the merger was an accomplished feat. In 1995, a recommendation was made to proceed with the merger at a joint meeting of the two groups in Wichita, Kansas. In 1999, at another joint meeting in St. Louis, recommendations were adopted that led to the merger, with their inaugural session held in Alberta. By 2002 the

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<sup>293</sup> James Urry, *None But Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia 1789-1889* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 1989); Stayer, "Structural Change," 101-103, 108, 134 -137.

Mennonite Church USA was a fully operational denominations (as was the Mennonite Church Canada.)<sup>294</sup>

As the evidence has shown, both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church had experienced some significant changes by the close of the twentieth century. Some of those changes would help facilitate the merger, while others would potentially carry the seeds of destruction into the newly formed body. As the new denomination began its life with the twenty-first century, conflict would arise over social issues such as gender and sexuality – issues that came to the fore of public attention as well. These issues would cause contention in a number of Christian groups. Unlike other groups, however, questions about polity, a problem that Good and others had foreseen prior to unification, would both exacerbate, and be exacerbated by, these social issues. After allowing almost 10 years to pass, Chapter 6 will examine the state of the Mennonite Church USA in the 2010s and explore the deep struggle the group was undergoing over questions of homosexual marriage and female leadership, as well as structural problems made obvious by those debates.

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<sup>294</sup> Strayer, “Structural Change,” 148-163, 299-304, 311-317; Mennonite Church USA, “Denominational Organization,”; Mennonite Church Canada, “A Brief History of Mennonites in Canada,”; Strayer, “Structural Change,” 281-285.

## **Chapter 6 – Sexuality, Gender, and Membership in the Mennonite Family**

In Chapter 6, I have chosen to look at the debates in the Mennonite press of the early 2010s as a snapshot of where the denomination stood some ten years after unification. There would naturally have been some logistical adjustments in the early years of unification, but after the passage of almost a decade, minor issues related to the merger that created the Mennonite Church USA should have resolved themselves. Sustained, ongoing disputes taking place more than ten years after the new group's formation indicate fundamental differences that cannot be dismissed as "growing pains." In fact, the Mennonite Church USA went almost immediately into a state of decline. As Finke and Stark have pointed out, the merger of denominations is indicative of decline, and newly merged groups do not often flourish. Indeed, mergers themselves are often a clear sign that the groups in question are in serious decline. Perhaps, viewing the early twentieth-first century as the declining stages in the lives of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church makes more sense, despite the fact that these two denominations had already technically ceased to exist.

On the surface of things, the Mennonite Church USA struggled with changing perceptions of sexuality, as well as issues of women in leadership. In these controversies, the denomination was dealing with the same issues being debated in American Christendom at large. Unlike other groups, however, issues of "heritage" also came to the fore. This was not an issue of ethnicity – those concerns had largely been dealt with in previous decades, though ethnic identity still figured prominently in some quarters of the Mennonite Church USA. Rather, this was an issue connected to theological patrimony. The notion of a specifically Anabaptist ethos had been articulated in the 1940s by Harold Bender, and as we saw in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 had

impacted Mennonite perceptions of current events. In the 2010s, issues of sexuality became tied to a controversy over which group in these debates were the true heirs to their Anabaptist patrimony.

The Mennonite Church USA experienced conflict from its inception. Disagreements were not new for members from either of the previous denominations. There had been dramatic differences of opinion on any number of issues – some of interest only to Mennonites, such as regulations surrounding dress and church discipline – and some of concern to society at large – such as peace, war, and racism. Mennonites did not see eye to eye on these issues, as shown in their varied responses to Vietnam and the civil rights movement. As the stories of the people in both earlier denominations, and on either side of these various issues, have shown – the many different positions taken on these concerns were frequently deeply held matters of conscience. Mennonites have a long history of following their convictions, even to the point of death. What made the conflicts in the Mennonite Church USA different had less to do with the subject, and more to do with their disparate understanding of church polity. The General Conference Mennonite Church had generally been able to hold these tensions in balance without disintegrating, by allowing their constituent members to come to different conclusion, while remaining unified. There was room for peace activists, separatist pacifists, and even those willing to perform military service in the General Conference Mennonite Church. The Mennonite Church, on the other hand, had generally been more concerned about unity of belief, such that when deeply held differences became apparent, the result was often schism, with many new groups breaking away over the years. As we saw in Chapter 4, when those who felt strongly that political activism was outside what they deemed the sphere of appropriate behavior, congregations began leaving the group. The differing understandings of polity brought into the



merger by these two denominations carried the seeds of fracture into the newly unified body.

Mennonites from these two former denominations had different ideas about how to govern, how to discipline, and ultimately the nature of Mennonite community. These differences came to the fore in discussions about sexuality and gender roles in the twenty-first century.

### **Anabaptist Activism**

Any discussion of religious dissent within Christian polities in the United States must acknowledge the role of Anabaptists. Over the course of the twentieth century, phrases such as “evangelical Christian” and words such as “Baptist” and “Southern Baptist” have acquired the connotation of representing centers of bitter reaction against political and social changes such as the pursuit of racial equality, the pursuit of gender equality (and, of course, the questioning of gender as an entirely stable and “natural” category of being), and the recognition of same sex relationships as a legitimate basis for family life. Likewise, when many people hear Mennonite, they think of the Amish or the Old Order Mennonites and assume that Mennonites have always been extreme exemplars of conservatism, but that is simply not true. Such a presumption causes us to forget the way in which Anabaptists were, at one time, the agents of change on behalf of ideas seen as new, different, and perhaps even threatening. In early sixteenth-century Europe, the notion of NOT baptizing infants was viewed as not only heresy, but as potentially endangering the souls of their unbaptized children. Likewise, Anabaptist’s ideas that the church and state should not be linked was disturbing to many not only on strictly religious grounds, but as a threat to the entire social order in the same way that some conservative Christians currently view the social changes of the early twenty-first century. This latest round of upheaval calls to mind Harold S. Bender’s Anabaptist Vision of the 1940s, in which he posited action above

doctrinal purity. He was countering the fundamentalism of the previous generation in the Mennonite Church, but his tone strikes a relevant chord with the current debate. In seeking to describe the Anabaptist ethos as discipleship over dogma, he explained the original movement thusly: “Theology was for them a means, not an end.” This line would not be out of place coming from the progressive wing in the social justice disputes that gnawed at the fabric of the Mennonite Church USA in the first two decades of the twentieth century.<sup>295</sup>

Anabaptism began as a challenge to the status quo – they were a group that was willing to actively question the accepted teachings of the church. Both those early Anabaptists, and the Roman Catholic and Reformed Churches who sought to squelch the movement, felt they had the authority of scripture to back them up. The various groups simply had different perspectives and emphases in interpreting it. More recent debate in the Mennonite Church USA is no different. Issues surrounding sexuality rocked the Mennonite Church USA just as they did the United States itself. Against this backdrop, the activist roots of the Mennonites began to show through, at least in some quarters. While some from the more conservative elements decried those with more inclusive views on sexuality and gender as having departed from Mennonite tradition and belief, a strong case can be made that these progressives were very much in the historical stream of Anabaptist thought.

In a blog post on the website of *The Mennonite* in May of 2011, Tim Nafziger picked up on this theme, and called out a recent editorial in the print magazine, and in a roundabout way, denominational leadership, for seemingly failing to recognize the historical continuity between

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<sup>295</sup> For a treatment of the radical nature of the Anabaptist movement, see William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth Century Anabaptism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans Publishing Company, 1996); Bender, “Anabaptist Vision,” 14.-15.

social justice activism and the original Anabaptists. Nafziger, a member of the Mennonite Church USA, and an activist for homosexual inclusion, frequently engaged in debate in the Mennonite press during this era. In the May issue of *The Mennonite*, Everett J. Thomas, the editor of that publication, as well as the CEO of The Mennonite, Inc., wrote an editorial entitled “Unconventional Convention?” in which he discussed the most recent biannual convention of the Mennonite Church USA. The article is primarily about logistics, potential ways to attract more youth, and various ideas about holding the youth conference separately from the main meeting. The impetus for the discussion was the threat on the part of some conference attendees not to return in 2011 if something was not done to assure them that there would not be uncomfortable advocacy for unpopular opinions. It is a quote early in the article from Executive Director Ervin Stutzman that Nafziger focused on. Among attendees at the 2009 convention in Columbus, Ohio, was a fairly vocal group advocating homosexual inclusion who were dubbed the “Pink Menos.” Of that group, Stutzman had this to say:

The experience...introduced a new level of engagement in controversial matters. ...The technique of social advocacy and confrontation that *we have taught* young adults in our schools has come to haunt our church’s most visible gathering, to the end that convention-goers feel immense pressure to take up sides against one another on [homosexuality].”<sup>296</sup>

Thomas goes on to discuss the convention using phrases such as “economic engine” and the possibility of “significant financial loss for the Executive Board.” Overall, the editorial does not paint a particularly savory picture. In discussing ways to offset the “disruption” caused by those advocating for the inclusion of homosexuals, everything is couched in terms of personal comfort

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<sup>296</sup> Everett J. Thomas, “Unconventional Convention?” in *The Mennonite* Vol 14, No 5, May 2011, 64.

and financial gain and loss. There is no attempt to discuss homosexuality in theological terms – the focus is on what will repel crowds and the money they bring.<sup>297</sup>

Nafziger is quick to pick up on the disconnect between a group founded by people willing to die for their beliefs, and their action of judging things based on convenience and economy, and he takes them to task. In a blog post entitled “Anabaptist Ghost” the author promotes the idea that advocacy is biblical:

Have we forgotten that in the cleansing of the temple, Jesus aimed his confrontation – his most in-your-face public witness – at his own religious leaders in the middle of the annual religious convention?<sup>298</sup>

Nafziger then quotes the scripture from Isaiah that Christ referenced when he cleared the temple, which talks about the temple being a house of prayer “for all people” and specifically makes mention of eunuchs (a group excluded from worship gatherings in Israel in other places in the Bible), as well as foreigners.<sup>299</sup>

For any readers who might not have gotten this point, Nafziger then discusses how the religious leaders responded to Jesus, and why – making the connection to the Mennonite Church USA 2009 convention and its aftermath clear: “No wonder they were trying to kill him. He was telling them they needed to let in the illegal immigrants and those who didn’t fit gender norms.”<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Everett J. Thomas, “Unconventional Convention?” 64.

<sup>298</sup> Tim Nafziger, “Anabaptist Ghosts, Part 1: Social Advocacy and Confrontation” TheMennonite.org May 9, 2011, (accessed September 2, 2020) <https://themennonite.org/anabaptist-ghosts-social-advocacy-and-confrontation-part-1/>; Matthew 21:12-17.

<sup>299</sup> Nafziger, “Anabaptist Ghosts,”; Matthew 21:12-17; Isaiah 56:4-8; Deuteronomy 23:1.

<sup>300</sup> Tim Nafziger, “Anabaptist Ghosts.”

Nafziger places the activism that leaders of the Mennonite Church USA decried solidly within the Anabaptist tradition:

I find social advocacy and confrontation at the heart of the gospel and at the roots of my Anabaptist tradition. To suggest that those of us who sought to embody this tradition [advocates of homosexual inclusion] at Columbus [sic] were haunting the convention is problematic.<sup>301</sup>

Nafziger goes on to compare the issue of homosexuality to the racial civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. As shown in Chapter 4, that too was a source of disagreement among Mennonites with those most dedicated to the “Anabaptist Vision” supporting it, and those most influenced by mainstream American fundamentalism opposing it in varying degrees.<sup>302</sup>

He continues with the theme of being in the tradition of early Anabaptists:

If Pink Mennos avoid confrontation, as Ervin would prefer, LGBTQ folks will continue to be bullied in Mennonite elementary schools, thrown out of their churches [sic] and ostracized by their families. The straight moderate can continue to promise dialogue and conversation indefinitely, without substantial change. ...The early Anabaptists understood this as well.<sup>303</sup>

Nafziger was not talking specifically about homosexuals in the last line, but about the principle that if action is not taken things will never change, and he relates a story about an early Anabaptist leader who was known to be confrontational (nonviolently, of course) and who was effectively able to preach in a church because of his persistence, to make this point.<sup>304</sup>

Nafziger concludes with a powerful statement which summarizes the centrality of Anabaptism to his argument:

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<sup>301</sup> Tim Nafziger, “Anabaptist Ghosts.”

<sup>302</sup> Tim Nafziger, “Anabaptist Ghosts.”

<sup>303</sup> Tim Nafziger, “Anabaptist Ghosts.”

<sup>304</sup> Tim Nafziger, “Anabaptist Ghosts.”

This Christian tradition of strong and public advocacy for justice was begun by Jesus of Nazareth and continued by Blaurock [the confrontational Anabaptist leader reference earlier] and King [Martin Luther King, Jr.] Pink Mennos embody and continue this stream today as they joyfully advocate and lovingly confront the inaction of many in the Mennonite community. If we are to sustain a living community of Anabaptist practice, we would do well to make room for them at the table.<sup>305</sup>

Nafziger makes the argument that advocacy is the patrimony of Anabaptists. Anabaptists have traditionally been on the margins of society – at least in the early days, and it is not surprising that some in the movement would minister to and advocate for those society has shunned. It is interesting to note that Thomas, editor of *The Mennonite*, whose piece drew such condemnation from Nafziger, resigned his position at *The Mennonite* in 2013.<sup>306</sup>

### **Same Sex Relationships and Citizenship in the Mennonite Family**

Perhaps the single most controversial issues facing Mennonites in the early twenty-first century centered on questions of sexuality. Conflicting opinions about homosexuality followed both sister denominations into the unification. In *The Mennonite*, the denominational publication of the General Conference Mennonite Church, homosexuality was referenced well over 50 times in 1998 alone. In the Mennonite Church's periodical, *The Gospel Herald*, the same topic was addressed almost 50 times between the beginning of 1997 and the end of 1998. This was a subject of rising concern in both groups as they formally came together. Following the merger, it became a full-blown crisis in the mid to late 2010s, as we shall see.

One interesting position taken by some in the Mennonite Church USA sought to bridge the divide between those who actively promoted homosexual inclusion and those who actively

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<sup>305</sup> Tim Nafziger, "Anabaptist Ghosts."

<sup>306</sup> Gordon Houser, "Thomas to Leave The Mennonite" Mennonite Church USA. August 27, 2013. (accessed December 3, 2020) <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/thomas-to-leave-the-mennonite/>

opposed it – an approach that came to be known as the “Third Way.” As is often the case with compromise, this approach failed to please either side, but as we will see, some of the arguments they made would be coopted by the two opposite ends of the continuum they attempted to navigate. Perhaps this position is best summed up by Berry Friesen who characterized third way congregations as “looking for a way to be traditional in what they teach and inclusive in what they do.” Such an approach teaches that heterosexual marriage is the original design and intent of God, while also considering the possibility of blessing same-sex unions – a kind of religious civil partnership, if you will:

Certainly this third way entails big changes for those who have regarded same-gender sexual relationships as the worst of the worst, a singular kind of sin... Repenting of making such a huge deal of homosexuality, and responding to gay and lesbian persons with the same combination of exhortation and encouragement that is offered others who persistently fall short of God’s perfection (yes, that includes quite a few of us), requires an unfamiliar humility.<sup>307</sup>

The goal seems to be an atmosphere in which homosexual behavior is viewed as being outside the ideal – perhaps even sinful, but one in which active homosexuals are not excluded, but are accepted as equal members of the group. Third way proponents sought a way to walk “with people through the losses and disappointments of life, including the inability to thrive within the heterosexual design of the Creator.” The author was well aware that such an approach would be viewed as a lax appeasement of sin by the more conservative and a poor outreach by openly affirming congregations. Even so, Friesen thought it was an approach most Mennonites would approve “Despite what you read in the online debates, my impression is that most Mennonites

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<sup>307</sup> Berry Friesen, “Third-Way Congregations and Homosexuality” [TheMennonite.org](https://themennonite.org). November 15, 2014 (accessed September 2, 2020) <https://themennonite.org/opinion/third-way-congregations-homosexuality/>

want a third way for their congregations in response to gay and lesbian men and women.”<sup>308</sup>  
Time would show that was not necessarily the case.

Reba Place Fellowship, a community in Evanston, Illinois, is one group in which this third way, as described by Berry Friesen, was put into action. RPF is more of an intentional community than a church. Reba Place is a bit like a monastic community that allows married couples as well as both single men and women. Most people in the Reba Place Fellowship belong to two area congregations of the Mennonite Church USA in the Chicago area. After three years of what Gordon Houser and Tim Otto describe as “slow conversation” Reba Place Fellowship adopted a position that “supports LGBT people who marry a person of the same sex...supports gay members who live celibate lives out of principle, as well as those who remain non-affirming out of conviction.” Despite a wide variety of beliefs, no one who remained with the group through the three-year period of discussion and discernment left after this position was adopted.<sup>309</sup>

In many ways, Reba Place Fellowship was the ideal community in which to attempt this unusual approach. Led by a female pastor, the community, which is over 50 years old and stable, had navigated other controversial topics such as the role of women in leadership as well as issues surrounding remarriage after divorce. The subject of Mennonite women in leadership positions, and the contention that topic brought about, will be addressed later in this chapter. The topic of divorce and remarriage is one that is often brought up as an example of how the church no longer strictly follows the teachings of the New Testament. A careful reading of the

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<sup>308</sup> Berry Friesen, “Third-Way Congregations.”

<sup>309</sup> Gordon Houser and Tim Otto “Reba Place Fellowship Embraces ‘Third Way’ for LGBT Christians” TheMennonite.org, May 2, 2016 (accessed September 2, 2020) <https://themennonite.org/daily-news/reba-place-fellowship-embraces-third-way-lgbt-christians/>



Gospels and the letters of the Apostle Paul would seem to indicate that a divorced Christian cannot enter into another marriage while their former spouse is living. Relatively few churches today maintain this standard, which those who support affirming same-sex marriage regard as hypocrisy. This argument is frequently used in both third way and affirming congregations. At any rate, based on their previously successful navigation of controversial issues, Reba Place was able to explore the issue of homosexuality via the third way approach with a minimal amount of fear.<sup>310</sup>

Despite attempts such as the third way approach to avoid splits, they did occur. When the Mennonite Church USA was formed, there were twenty-two area conferences, with 1,062 congregations, and 114,753 members. As of September 1, 2020, only sixteen conferences remain. Two conferences united but the others left the denomination. The number of congregations is down to 530, and the number of members has dropped to 62,000.<sup>311</sup> One of the primary issues leading to this decline was disagreement over the church's response to homosexuality.

One case in particular highlights the dissension over this issue and shows not only the divisions homosexuality caused in churches, but also in individual families – the dispute within the Wenger family. This interfamily discussion in the Mennonite press also helped bring about one of the first conference-wide defections from the Mennonite Church USA. The aftermath of this particular episode also highlights some of the structural preferences that continued to divide

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<sup>310</sup> Houser and Otto, "Reba Place."

<sup>311</sup> Mennonite Church USA, Church Structure, Area Conferences, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/who-are-mennonites/church-structure/area-conferences/> (accessed September 11, 2020); Rich Preheim. "Mennonite Church USA." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite\\_Church\\_USA&oldid=161110](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite_Church_USA&oldid=161110) (accessed September 25, 2020)

members of the two previous denominations. This case even received press coverage outside of Mennonite media – albeit in a largely Mennonite community. The case in question involved Mennonite minister Chester Wenger, who had his credentials revoked by the Lancaster Mennonite Conference a short time before the conference chose to leave the Mennonite Church USA. Following the legalization of same-sex marriage by Pennsylvania, one of Wenger’s sons who had been excommunicated decades earlier because of his homosexuality decided to wed his long-term partner and asked his father if he would officiate at the ceremony. Wenger willingly did so, precipitating such turmoil in the Lancaster Conference that it eventually led to him having his credentials revoked. Shortly thereafter, he wrote an opinion piece that was posted on the website of *The Mennonite* – which had become the official periodical of the Mennonite Church USA following the merger. In this piece, Chester Wenger explained his rationale for officiating at his son’s ceremony, as well as providing his thoughts on homosexuality and the church more generally.<sup>312</sup>

Wenger used an interesting approach to the issue in what he called an “open letter to my beloved church” – an approach that readers of *The Mennonite* would instantly understand. In the third chapter of Philippians, the Apostle Paul warns the church in Philippi against legalism and rules-based religion, before appealing for unity in the church in that city. In the process of discrediting a works-based, rule-oriented righteousness, Paul gives his own credentials from his old life in Judaism, making the argument that if rule following were the key, he would be the most likely to benefit, as he had been a strict follower of the law in all senses. Wenger takes that same approach, showing his position of eminence in Mennonite circles, making the comparison

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<sup>312</sup> Tim Nafziger, “The Hole in Lancaster Conference’s Case Against Chester Wenger” *TheMennonite.org*, November 9, 2014, (accessed September 10, 2020)<https://themennonite.org/hole-lancaster-conferences-case-chester-wenger/>

explicit. In fact, early in this article, he says “if you will allow me to paraphrase the words of the Apostle Paul...” He then proceeds to present himself as thoroughly Lancaster Conference Mennonite. Although born and baptized in the Virginia Conference Mennonite Church, his mother was the daughter of a Lancaster Conference bishop, and besides, the Virginia Conference, at the time of his youth was also extremely conservative – so much so that Eastern Mennonite Seminary (Eastern Mennonite University today), a school in Virginia, was created as a counter to what many saw as liberal trends at Goshen College. Wenger’s father was the second president of that institution. Interestingly enough, in 2015 EMU added sexual orientation to its list of attributes against which discrimination is prohibited. Wenger’s deep connections in the Mennonite world did not end there. He did mission work in Ethiopia to great effect, becoming the first chairman of a church in that nation, one that has since become the largest Mennonite church in the world, as well as establishing schools and training program in many locations, all under the auspices of the Lancaster Conference. Additionally, he served as a pastor in Pennsylvania for many years – also in that same conference. His roots ran deep in the Lancaster Conference, and he made sure to point that out, before addressing the topic of homosexuality.<sup>313</sup>

Even in his introduction, there are subtle hints of what is to come, as a reader familiar with the controversy (and there were many who were) would pick up on. Wenger describes himself as a “father of 8 children (one deceased) *all of whom* love the Lord and serve his Kingdom.” (The emphasis is my own.) As we shall see, Wenger does not find homosexual

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<sup>313</sup> Philippians 3; Chester Wenger, “An Open Letter To My Beloved Church,” *TheMennonite.org*, November 6, 2014, (accessed September 2, 2020) <https://themennonite.org/opinion/open-letter-beloved-church/> ; Jeremy Weber, “Peace Churches Out: Mennonite Schools Leave CCCU to Avoid Same-Sex Marriage Split” in *Christianity Today*, September 21, 2015, (accessed September 10, 2020) <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2015/september/cccu-emu-goshen-college-okwu-union-membership-status.html>

behavior, at least in the context of marriage, incompletable with Christianity. He closes his introduction with another quote from the Paul:

My life has been filled with much joy seeing God at work in numerous settings. God's grace has been shown daily on my behalf. But as the Apostle Paul has said so well, "whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things."

Losing the confidence of a conference that he had faithfully served for over six decades, as shown by their de-credentiating him at the ripe old age of 96, does in many ways seem to fit the description of a "gain" lost "for the sake of Christ." But it becomes clear through the remainder of his piece that he considers being true to his changing beliefs about sexuality, as well as being involved in the marriage of his son were a service to Christ, and worth the consequences.<sup>314</sup>

In the late 1970s, one of Chester Wenger's young adult sons (who happened to be homosexual and who he does not identify by name) was excommunicated from the Mennonite Church, without any consultation with either the son or the parents, much to the grief of the Wenger family. This event, coupled with conversations with other families in similar circumstances, led at least some members of the Wenger family to reconsider their stance on the issue, and reexamine the scriptures to see if perhaps there was a way to make their understanding of the Bible compatible with their experience with their son. Harkening back to that same chapter in Philippians, Chester compares the controversy over homosexuality to the controversy over circumcision in the early church. In the earliest days of the church, some Jewish Christians felt that gentile believers could not be a part of the church without undergoing circumcision – a ritual required of all Jewish males. Paul vehemently disagreed, and eventually a church council

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<sup>314</sup> Chester Wenger, "An Open Letter"; Philippians 4;7-8.

in Jerusalem agreed with this view. In Matthew 18:18, Christ is quoted “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” This passage has often been applied to the teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church, but Chester Wenger applies it to any church authorities. With this verse in mind, Wenger writes “The church we belong to has the power to bind and loose.” He felt that this power should be used to include people with a homosexual orientation into the church.<sup>315</sup>

Wenger was making a point here very similar to that made by many advocates of the “third way”: While God’s original intention and design may have envisioned only heterosexual relationships and families, thousands of years of human experience with sin have created homosexual relationships as safe havens for some of God’s children. Was it not in the interest of the entire church, community, or family that such relationships be recognized as such in order that the greater sin of promiscuity may be stopped? His conclusions are a bit different from proponents of this “third way”, but they do share some assumptions. He writes:

The world we live in is no longer the idyllic Eden. It is a broken, complex, messy, violent and yet wonderful world. God’s mercy-filled grace infuses our broken world with a goodness that keeps surprising us with joy – and healing. God’s grace also calls us to faithfully love God and neighbor above all else.<sup>316</sup>

He goes on to say:

Because of the brokenness of all sexualities that abuse, lust, access pornography, have sex with unmarried partners of the same or other gender – because of this brokenness, the church must rise up to reclaim a godly and wholesome sexuality... ...a godly sexuality that is wholesome because it is covenanted, accountable to and blessed within the church... ...a godly sexuality that is wholesome because it calls everyone to recommit

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<sup>315</sup> Chester Wenger, “An Open Letter,”; Philippians 4; Matthew 18:18.

<sup>316</sup> Chester Wenger, “An Open Letter.”

our bodies (whether heterosexual or homosexual) to be temples of the Holy Spirit, seeking first the Kingdom of God and covenanting to follow Jesus every day.<sup>317</sup>

He clearly had come to view homosexual marriage as compatible with the Christian life.

After performing the wedding ceremony for his son, Wenger reported the event to the Lancaster Conference. The wedding itself had been a small private gathering of six people. Had Wenger not reported it, there is every reason to believe that the Conference would never have discovered it. But this option of operating under the radar of church authority was not one Wenger chose. He valued the Mennonite community too much to be duplicitous. He had come to the conclusion that the church's treatment of homosexuals was wrong. As this was an issue that went beyond just his family, he felt making his voice heard on this matter had become of paramount importance. To do otherwise, would have been to commit an act of sacrilege. Even so, he dreaded the prospect of disunity:

I am profoundly reluctant to write this letter because I know there are those it will wound deeply. But I have also come to the conviction that I can no longer hide the light the Lord has lit within me, under a bushel. I want to share with you what the Lord has been telling me and my dear life companion.

In little more than a month, his credentials were revoked. Of these consequences, he had the following to say: "I am at peace with their decision and understand their need to take this action." While he may have understood why it happened, he held out hope that things would change:

Paul and Peter both received harsh criticism for years for their deeds but the Holy Spirit led the Jerusalem conference to heartily approve their testimony and leadership. My prayer is that our Church leaders in their next Assembly will likewise not only approve but warmly invite into congregational fellowship those believers in Christ who have

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<sup>317</sup> Chester Wenger, "An Open Letter."

suffered exclusion from membership in our Mennonite Church. Let us pray the Spirit of Christ will teach us how to love and welcome the outcasts as Jesus did.<sup>318</sup>

Sadly, for Wenger, this was not to be. While hoping for change, he was not naïve, and clearly understood that some, perhaps many, people would disagree not only with his actions, but with his theological arguments. It was a struggle within his own family:

My dear wife Sara Jane and I love all our children. We give thanks for the remarkable Kingdom work each of them is doing. We know that several of our children believe that the church should not endorse same-sex marriage. And several of our children believe that same-sex marriage is a faithful and godly choice when blessed by the church.<sup>319</sup>

The response from those who disagreed with his logic and interpretation of scripture were not long in coming. Just twenty days later, another open letter appeared on the website of *The Mennonite* with a different perspective, and it came from his daughter and son-in-law.

Although disagreeing with Wenger's conclusions and his call for full inclusion of homosexuals in the church, the response was, in typical Mennonite fashion, exquisitely polite and sought common ground where possible. Richard and Jewel Wenger Showalter titled their opposing opinion piece "An Open Letter to the Mennonite Family." Without explicitly referencing Paul as the first letter had, the Showalters also laid out their Mennonite credentials. "As church planters, missionaries, educators, mission administrators, parents, and now grandparents, we have walked as part of the Mennonite family throughout our lives." Having established their authority to address such issues in the church, they clearly take on Wenger's thesis in as conciliatory a tone as possible:

Especially after reading Chester and Sara Jane Wenger's eloquent appeal to change the church's approach to same-sex covenantal unions, we are also moved to write the church. We would love to agree with them because they are beloved elders (Jewel's parents) and

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<sup>318</sup> Chester Wenger, "An Open Letter."

<sup>319</sup> Chester Wenger, "An Open Letter."

we want to walk in step with them. We resonate deeply with their call for compassionate, embracing love for all those in the LGBTQ community. We affirm that embrace.

They proceed to repent of the lack of compassion and homophobia that they recognize in the church, along with the self-righteous attitudes demonstrated by some members. Nevertheless, they remain firm in their convictions: “we believe homosexual actions are sinful and that we should not attempt to craft a more inclusive definition of Christian marriage.”<sup>320</sup>

Like the Wengers, the Showalters appeal to scripture, and attempt to cite their methods as being wholly in line with traditional Mennonite and Anabaptist practice. They repeatedly seek to distance themselves from homophobia, pointing out the mission statement of their congregation in the Lancaster Conference: “We welcome all people into a safe and healing community in which we grow to be more like Jesus and join him in extending his kingdom to the world.” And the Showalters make a particular point of stressing the all – “Yes, ‘all people.’” Nonetheless, their underlying position is ultimately absolute. To accept same sex couples would, in their view, be akin to diluting the church’s long opposition to war or rejecting the sanctity of baptism. (One cannot help but note that such dilution, at least in some quarters, had already taken place.) They claim to echo the question of the early Anabaptists when faced with execution over disputed issues by asking “Show us from the scriptures.” The authors use this line over and over, and as in the original letter, a great deal of scripture is referenced, including 1 Corinthians 5, which deals with sexual immorality in the church in Corinth and the church discipline it brought. They also specifically quote directly from Matthew 19:4-5:

Please “show us from the scriptures” where same-sex behavior is not understood to be sinful and under God’s judgment. Show us where same-sex unions are part of God’s creation ideals for marriage. Jesus quoted Genesis that at the beginning the Creator

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<sup>320</sup> Richard Showalter and Jewel Wenger Showalter, “An Open Letter to the Mennonite Family,” *TheMennonite.org*, November 26, 2014, (accessed September 02, 2020) <https://themenonite.org/opinion/open-letter-mennonite-family/>



“made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife...”

They are unconvinced that a scriptural case can be made for same-sex marriage, though the tone of the letter in its entirety seems to leave open the questions of civil partnerships for church members. They view homosexuality as a sin, but they seem more concerned about the effects of the church legitimizing same-sex marriage than they do about necessarily disciplining homosexual members. Again, like their father, they cover some of the same territory as the “third way” movement, but also like their father, they come away with a conclusion different from that of the third way proponents.<sup>321</sup>

Even as the Showalter’s continue to press their opposition, they clearly do not wish to be cast as breachers of the peace:

We don’t wish to be divisive or to split the church. We don’t wish to cause pain and rejection. We do not support discrimination or violence against people because of their sexual orientation or practice. But we do wish to be faithful to the word of God.

They go on to acknowledge the changes the early church made regarding the role of women, slavery, circumcision, and divorce and remarriage, but they are unwilling to extend these changes to include homosexual marriage.<sup>322</sup>

Despite the Showalter’s desire to avoid a schism in the church, their closing lines show clearly that such a division is all but inevitable:

Jesus said, “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me...” “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?...whoever does the will of my Father in heaven...”

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<sup>321</sup> Showalter and Showalter, “Letter to the Mennonite Family”; I Corinthians 5; Matthew 19:4-5.

<sup>322</sup> Showalter and Showalter, “Letter to the Mennonite Family.”

...Jesus calls us to honor him above self, family, clan, tribe, and nation. May it be so for us as a church.

To the authors, this is an issue of first importance – clearly the proverbial hill they will choose to die on.<sup>323</sup>

This debate is fascinating on many levels and shows in microcosm some of the many facets of a drama that has been repeatedly reenacted in Mennonite churches and in the larger Christian world, as well as in secular American society, over at least the past quarter of a century. This argument shows how people raised in the same religious tradition can hold opposing opinions. It is also interesting to note that often, having a family member who is openly gay can begin to change perceptions – this is a common occurrence in Mennonite (and other) circles. Personal acquaintance with someone involved in a forbidden activity somehow renders that activity more palatable. This phenomenon has already been discussed regarding changing views on military service in earlier chapters. Nonetheless, the Wenger family and their divisions are proof that even deep personal connections do not guarantee a shift in belief.

At a theological level, the way in which scripture is used in these articles is also fascinating, and a bit mystifying. Chester Wenger leans heavily on the Apostle Paul in his arguments favoring same sex marriage – the same Apostle Paul who seems to publicly condemn homosexual behavior in at least three separate passages, though he obviously does not reference any of those. He also quotes Old Testament passages, despite the fact that the Old Testament penalty for homosexuality was death.<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>323</sup>Showalter and Showalter, “Letter to the Mennonite Family”; Matthew 10:37; Matthew 12:48-50.

<sup>324</sup>Chester Wenger, “An Open Letter”; Showalter and Showalter, “Letter to the Mennonite Family”; Romans 1:26-27: Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust

The Showalters, on the other hand quote Jesus extensively in their opposition to same-sex marriage, though Jesus is not recorded as having ever directly spoken to this issue. They reference 1 Corinthians 5, which deals with sexual immorality, and the church discipline prescribed for such actions, even though their focus is about homosexual marriage and not church discipline, while ignoring the following chapter which deals explicitly with homosexuality. These are seminary trained ministers who taught in Bible schools. Both the Wengers and the Showalters knew the pertinent passages, but chose to ignore the most explicit ones, even though they would have supported their viewpoint far better than the ones they chose. This is especially true of the Showalters.<sup>325</sup>

The rather odd way in which they chose to use scripture, again particularly in their argument against same-sex unions, hints at the emotional, almost visceral, response this issue elicited in many people. While most of those who wrote to *The Mennonite* liked to claim that they are inherently logical and based their views and positions on rationally obtained facts, these arguments utilized the Bible for their own point-of-view. Wenger clearly found no scriptures that directly support homosexuality, and so he needed to be a bit more creative in making his position. Even so, there are scholarly debates about the exact nature of the activities that Paul condemns in the New Testament that might be used to make a case that his statements on the subject are not a blanket condemnation of consensual same-sex relations, but Wenger does not make use of such arguments. Although disputed, there are some Greek scholars who argue a

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for one another. Men committing indecent acts with other men, and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.: Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.; Leviticus 20:13.

<sup>325</sup> Showalter and Showalter, "Letter to the Mennonite Family."

word translated as servant in Matthew may be translated in a way that indicates a homosexual partner, and there are Hebrew scholars who argue that the relationship between David and Johnathan may have been sexual. These are all contested positions, but they would have made the most logical sense in arguing that the Bible supports homosexual relationships. I would argue that Wenger was guided as much by emotion as by scriptural evidence.<sup>326</sup>

There were others, outside of the Wenger/Showalter family, who joined the debate as well, and some of them, such as Tim Nafziger were supportive of Wenger. In fact, Nafziger entered the debate even before the Showalter's had published their response. In a piece entitled "The Hole in Lancaster Conference's Case Against Chester Wenger" the author questions the authenticity of the rationale given by the conference for revoking Wenger's credentials. "Lancaster Conference has the authority to purge Wenger from their ranks, but they should have the courage to take responsibility for their punitive actions, not pass the buck." Nafziger makes a claim that is a fairly heated accusation, at least by Mennonite standards. The heart of the issue is that the Lancaster Conference claimed that they were revoking Wenger's credentials because "Pastors holding credentials in a conference of Mennonite Church USA may not perform a same-sex covenant." The Lancaster Conference's position seems to imply that they were following a top-down denominational policy, but Nafziger disputes this claim, stating "there is clearly not

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<sup>326</sup> Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; 1 Timothy 1:9; Matthew 8:5-13; For a length discussion of this issue, see Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (New York: Convergent, 2014). This book came out the same year as the Wenger controversy, but Vines makes use of scholarly work that would have been available to Wenger.; See also Daniel L. Helminiak, *Sex and the Sacred: Gay Identity and Spiritual Growth* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012); 2 Samuel 2:26; Susan Ackerman, *When Heroes Love: The Ambiguity of Eros in the Stories of Gilgamesh and David* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 165-231; Jean-Fabrice Nardelli, *Homosexuality and Liminality in Gilgame and Samuel* (Amsterdam, Hakkert, 2007), 28-63.

churchwide agreement on the prohibition against performing same-sex covenants...” He goes on to quote Ervin Stutzman, the Executive Director of the Mennonite Church USA:

The differences in the CLC [the body that would be responsible for creating policy manuals for congregations] largely reflect the variety of leadership practices within the 21 area conferences across our church who currently hold the credentials for their leaders. They do not all agree on what it means to be recognized as a minister across Mennonite Church USA, not just within the confines of a local church or area conference.

In other words, conferences are free to credential ministers as they choose, apart from the Mennonite Church USA’s official direction, and this came directly from the leader of the denomination, via the official denominational website.<sup>327</sup>

For Nafziger, this issue went beyond the issue of same-sex unions, or even credentialing policies to what he viewed as the heart of the problem in the denomination – leadership expectations – a recurring theme across disputes, as we will see. Apart from a shifting of blame for a potentially polarizing decision, he viewed this as plea for the episcopal governing structure the Lancaster Conference had known in the premerger days of the Mennonite Church. He characterized the conference’s rationale for their credentialing decision on the Wenger case thusly: “Lancaster longing for top-down denominational rule enforcement...” He was not the only one to make the connection between the rather confused denominational response to homosexuality and disparate opinions about how the Mennonite Church USA should be organized and governed.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Tim Nafziger, “Lancaster Conference’s Case”; Ervin Stutzman, “A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership” in the Equipping Column, Mennonite Church USA (accessed September 11, 2020)

<https://www.mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/a-shared-understanding-of-church-leadership/>

<sup>328</sup> Tim Nafziger, “Lancaster Conference’s Case.”

A few months before the Wenger controversy broke, another retired minister sensed that the growing disagreement over homosexuality would eventually upset the uneasy relationship the two sister denominations had entered into despite the varying views on governing structure both brought with them. Even the title of the piece “Reflections of an ‘Old’ Mennonite in a former GC Church” highlights the division between the two groups almost 15 years into the merger. After giving a brief history of his background and connections with both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church – he pastored a dual conference congregation – he begins his opinion piece with an analogy fitting for a discussion of sexuality and the church:

When I supported the merger of the two denominations, I was not aware of the profound differences between the two groups. As I see it now, the two denominations began living together without getting married.

The author then goes on to explain the fundamentally different approach each group had to governing – an issue that has been discussed at length in previous chapters.<sup>329</sup>

The author hit on a fundamental truth, one that not everyone was aware of – theological positions began to shift once the two denominations became one:

We didn’t effectively combine the different ways we worked together and made decisions... The living arrangement worked until we came to the discussion around homosexuality... The two ways of resolving collided, and the current living arrangement is not working. At the same time, the lines have blurred. Now there are progressives and conservatives across all area conferences.<sup>330</sup>

He was correct – as the divisions over homosexuality spread in both areas of former Mennonite Church strength and former General Conference strength, the conflicting approaches to

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<sup>329</sup> “Reflections of an ‘Old’ Mennonite in a Former GC Church” TheMennonite.org, August 1, 2014, (accessed September 2, 2020) <https://themennonite.org/opinion/reflections-old-mennonite-former-gc-church/>

<sup>330</sup> “Reflections of an ‘Old’ Mennonite.”

governance made the situation that much messier – now both proponents of accepting homosexuality and those opposed could begin to lobby for a governing style they felt best fit their beliefs on this issue, resulting in the possibility of four potentially different camps.

The author reduces the theological debate to a difference in interpretation of scripture and the requirements of church discipline. “Progressives tend to see Scripture more as a guide that needs to be interpreted in the light of Christ and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.” He asserts that conservatives view the Bible as more of “rule book.” Interestingly, he does not take a position – seemingly acknowledging both positions as legitimate. His main concern seems to be looking for a way to achieve unity going forward.<sup>331</sup>

Would it be possible to let the various area conferences do the “GC thing” and be accountable only to themselves and responsible for themselves? Individual area conferences would not be responsible for or accountable to other conferences. As we are now doing, individual congregations could line up with conferences where they feel comfortable. ...unless we can relieve the sense of accountability/responsibility for “wrong” decisions made in another far-off conference, congregations/conferences will continue to walk away.<sup>332</sup>

Of course, things always seem clearer in retrospect, but one wonders how the dispute over the treatment of homosexuals, and the status accorded to same-sex relationships, might have played out had the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church not merged. It will become increasingly clear that the sense of accountability/responsibility the author worried about was not relieved, and many churches and conferences did walk away.

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<sup>331</sup> “Reflections of an ‘Old’ Mennonite.”

<sup>332</sup> “Reflections of an ‘Old’ Mennonite.”

## **Ordination of Women**

The debate over same sex relationships occurred simultaneously with one over the role of women in church leadership. As with the debates about homosexuality, each of the sister denominations came into the union already struggling with the issue. And again, differing expectations about leadership style became a flashpoint regarding the role of women in the church. As was usual, former Mennonite Church members seemed to want a definitive denominational stance, regardless of how they felt about women's ordination, while those from the General Conference group were more comfortable with letting such questions be dealt with at the regional conference level. They were, as one minister said when speaking about the homosexual debate "doing the 'GC thing.'"

The debate over how to address women seeking a leadership role in Mennonite circles is not a recent development. The first woman ordained to serve in a Mennonite church was in 1911. This took place in the Netherlands – one of the birthplaces of the Anabaptist movement from which Mennonites sprang. It must be remembered, that on balance, Mennonites who remained in Europe were considerably less conservative than those who moved to the United States. Although this was not a new debate, even in America, it came much more to the fore in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, likely encouraged by the wider conversation surrounding women's liberation that was taking place at roughly the same time. The General Conference Mennonite Church passed a resolution on ordination in 1974 that said, in part, that the denomination was "Affirming that in Christ there is neither male nor female and that God is no respecter of persons, neither race nor class, nor sex should be considered barriers in calling a minister." Those who crafted the resolution drew heavily from the Apostle Paul's writing in



Galatians 3:28 and Act 10:34. On the surface, this would seem fairly straight forward, but the final words “calling a minister” are significant. Congregations may call ministers, and they may choose not to call ministers. This action was an advancement for women – 44 women were either licensed or ordained in the General Conference by 1987.<sup>333</sup> Being credentialed, and having a church to lead, are not the same thing. There were conference and congregations that were not ready for such an innovation, and true to their congregational style of governing roots, decisions about hiring ministers remained a prerogative of the local church.

Take the Western District Conference for example. In 1981, David A. Haury wrote a detailed history of the Western District Conference of the General Conference Mennonite Church. In one of the final chapters he addresses the issue of the ordination of women:

The Western District Conference has not yet seriously faced the implications of an increasing number of women who desire to enter the ministry. No Conference congregation has accepted a woman as its primary or sole pastor, and few, if any, congregations appear to be taking this step.<sup>334</sup>

Not only does this highlight the difference between theoretically accepting female ministers and accepting that as a substantive lived reality, but his remarks also highlight the variety of positions held in this single regional conference concerning the proper sphere for women. He mentions a handful of female ministers in secondary positions of leadership, but then goes on to say:

Some congregations are still debating the acceptance of women as Sunday school superintendents or deacons, and women have only recently received the privilege of voting in a few congregations.<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> Harold S. Bender and John A. Esau. "Ordination" in *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. (accessed September 24, 2020) <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Ordination&oldid=162953>

<sup>334</sup> David A. Haury, *Prairie People*, 396-397.

<sup>335</sup> David A. Haury, *Prairie People*, 396-397.

I can attest to the validity of this statement. I vividly remember the controversy that erupted when a woman was nominated for deacon in a church election in the early 1990s in the General Conference congregation in which I was raised. She did not win, and today, almost 30 years later, there are still no female deacons in that congregation. As always, there was wide variation in practice in the General Conference.<sup>336</sup> These varied attitudes followed them into their new denominational home.

Ordination of women was a source of controversy in the pre-merger Mennonite Church as well. Oddly enough, on this particular issue, leaders in the Mennonite Church were following a more General Conference style approach and allowing their regional conferences latitude in whether or not to ordain women. As we saw in the controversy over Chester Wenger, once in the new denomination, former Mennonite Church members seemingly expressed a desire to have credentialing decision made at the top, even though, in a somewhat out of character move, they had left such decisions up to regional conferences even before they united. As we shall see, some from the former Mennonite Church were displeased with this approach, even though it had been their own since at least the 1980s. And while they were following the pattern of the General Conference in this issue, there seemed, at least from a numerical position, to be even less support for women in ordained ministry than there was in General Conference group.<sup>337</sup>

By the mid-1980s about half of the regional conferences in the Mennonite Church were willing to ordain women. Even so, in 1987 there were only 34 such women – 10 less than in the

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<sup>336</sup> McKee, "Customs and Convictions," 127-128.

<sup>337</sup> Bender and Esau, "Ordination"; Bender and Hostetler. "Mennonite Church"; James Gingerich, "General Conference Mennonite Church (United States)" in *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. (accessed September 24, 2020)  
[https://gameo.org/index.php?title=General\\_Conference\\_Mennonite\\_Church\\_\(United\\_States\)&oldid=122333](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=General_Conference_Mennonite_Church_(United_States)&oldid=122333)

General Conference group, which was numerically much smaller than the Mennonite Church. In 1990, membership in the Mennonite Church was over three times larger than that of the General Conference. Of those 34 women, 14 of them were serving in dual-affiliation congregations, so one could make the argument that there were only 20 women serving in an ordained capacity in congregations solely connected with the Mennonite Church. Women in leadership was a bone of contention that prevented some congregations from accepting the merger when it eventually came. In fact, there were parachurch groups such as Fellowship of Concerned Mennonites who actively discouraged regional conferences from joining with the eventual merger over this issue (among others) viewing it as another step of “unfaithfulness.” These were not Mennonite Fundamentalists, per se – they were not primarily worried over questions of attire or television and radio. That group had mostly exited the denomination in the two decades prior. These individuals represented those in the Mennonite Church who had accepted a more Americanized fundamentalism, as is evidenced by their stated concerns about the same issues that had birthed that mainstream movement in the previous century.<sup>338</sup>

It is interesting to note that this was not a settled issue in the Mennonite Church prior to the merger. The fact that organizations such as FCM were encouraging congregations and conferences not to take part in the merger hints strongly at the possibility that some saw this as a way to exit the denomination in a less caustic way – they were not rejecting the Mennonite Church so much as a merger with another group, even though it was centered on disagreements

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<sup>338</sup> Bender and Esau, "Ordination"; Bender and Hostetler, "Mennonite Church "; Gingerich, "General Conference Mennonite Church"; Stutzman, *From Nonresistance to Justice*, 244-245; Wenger, Linden M. and Samuel J. Steiner. "Fellowship of Concerned Mennonites." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. (accessed September 25, 2020) [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Fellowship\\_of\\_Concerned\\_Mennonites&oldid=165597](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Fellowship_of_Concerned_Mennonites&oldid=165597); “The Purposes of FCM” under About Us. Fellowship of Concerned Mennonites. (accessed September 25, 2020) <https://fcminformer.org/about-us/>

they already had within the Mennonite Church. Ordination for women was far from a settled issue in either denomination before they united, and it proved to be one of several factors that tore at the fabric of the newly unified group.

Some in Mennonite circles have posited the genesis of what has sometimes been a secondary role for women in the life of Mennonite leadership outside the usual scriptures quoted in defense of denying women roles in church governance. Marlene Epp, a professor of history at Conrad Grebel University College at the University of Waterloo in Ontario feels that excluding women is very much an outcome of the Mennonite insistence on pacifism.<sup>339</sup> Speaking at a workshop she conducts in 2015 entitled “Global Mennonite Women Building Peace” she had this to say:

Historically, the peace position meant not bearing arms. But because women weren't conscripted, the definition didn't really extend to them... .I think the peace position for Anabaptist Mennonites is an opportunity, but can also be a dilemma for women...<sup>340</sup>

It is interesting to note her use of the term “Anabaptist Mennonites” – perhaps a tacit acknowledgement that some had left their Anabaptist roots, as has been shown by the rise of mainstream American fundamentalism in some Mennonite circles.

Epp is not alone in drawing a connection between traditional pacifism and a disconnect from the lives of women. Carol Penner, a Mennonite minister from Alberta, who also took part in the workshop concurred. She said that in her experience, peacemaking was always talked about in terms of not joining the army. It took her some time to see that it went beyond that. She

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<sup>339</sup> Kelli Yoder, “Anabaptist Women Share Stories of Ordination and Peacebuilding” under Daily News Posts, TheMennonite.org, August 1, 2015 <https://themennonite.org/daily-news/anabaptist-women-share-stories-of-ordination-and-peacebuilding/> (accessed September 3, 2020); “Marlene Epp” People Profiles, Conrad Grebel University College, (accessed September 22, 2020) <https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/people-profiles/marlene-epp>

<sup>340</sup> Marlene Epp, quoted in Kelli Yoder, “Anabaptist Women Share.”

credited her widened understanding of how making peace went beyond that to her observation of domestic violence, which she found to be an opportunity for women to actively work as peacemakers.<sup>341</sup>

Sometimes the issue of women in leadership became linked directly with questions about homosexuality. In an opinion piece entitled “Do Women Cause MC USA Anxiety” Mennonite minister Cynthia Lapp tackles not only questions about how the role women in leadership intersects with issues of sexuality, but also addresses what she sees as declining opportunities for ordained women in the Mennonite Church USA. The piece begins with a discussion of the controversy ignited in the denomination when the Mountain States Conference chose to license Theda Good for ministry in February 2014. (Two years later, Good would be ordained in the same conference.) The ostensible issue is that Good is a lesbian who happens to be married to a woman. As has been shown, questions surrounding homosexual marriage created much debate in the denomination, but Lapp sees another issue at work: “...what if Theda is just the latest woman to make the church uncomfortable? Perhaps the current ‘crisis’ reveals that as a church we have not yet settled the question that was labeled a threat decades ago, that of women in leadership and ministry...”<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Kelli Yoder, “Anabaptist Women Share”

<sup>342</sup> Hannah Heinzeker, “Theda Good ordained at First Mennonite Church of Denver” Daily News. Anabaptist World, December 12, 2016. (accessed December 3, 2020) <https://anabaptistworld.org/theda-good-ordained-first-mennonite-church-denver/> ; Cynthia Lapp, “Do Women Cause MC USA Anxiety” under Opinion Post, TheMennonite.org, September 1, 2014, (accessed September 3, 2020) <https://themennonite.org/opinion/do-women-cause-mc-usa-anxiety/>

Lapp asserts that at least some of the drama surrounding same-sex marriage is connected to resistance to women in positions of authority, and she does not limit her analysis of this phenomenon to the case of Theda Good.

Lapp cites four women, including herself, who have had their credentials reviewed for either performing, or indicating that they would be willing to perform same-sex ceremonies. She describes another female minister who was sanctioned on two different occasions over the issue, and one who had her credentials revoked. Lapp claimed that only one man had been in the press and sanctioned over the same issue. The editor disputed such a claim in part, citing three other men who had their credentials revoked over homosexuality. The claim about press coverage is not disputed – perhaps that is why Lapp was apparently unaware. Even with the additional men listed, it seems discipline over this issue was more prevalent against women. Perhaps women were more willing to perform such ceremonies. An argument could be made that Mennonite women understood discrimination in a way that Mennonite men did not, and thus would be more in sympathy with other marginalized groups. Perhaps it really is a case of institutional antipathy toward female ministers – either way there does appear to be a clear element of gender difference in addressing this issue. Lapp is acutely aware of these and other possible explanations.<sup>343</sup>

Lapp acknowledges that the women in question were all in relatively progressive urban centers, and that they had the backing of their congregations, even if they did not meet with approval at the conference level. Such knowledge as the fact that their “job” would be secure

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<sup>343</sup> Cynthia Lapp, “Do Women Cause MC USA Anxiety?”

likely emboldened them to counter the prevailing opinion in the various conferences. She is not satisfied with that alone, though:

Perhaps it is naïve to wonder if the anxiety would be roiling this much if it had been men that had taken the lead in performing same-sex ceremonies. But one wonders if Mennonite Church USA is still so captivated by the patriarchy that when women dare step out in leadership they are put in their place by those who hold the power in the institution.<sup>344</sup>

It is clear, as the Chester Wenger case illustrates, even well known, well connected men in the denomination could and did face harsh penalties for performing such ceremonies. Nevertheless, Wenger was in the very conservative Lancaster Conference. It does beg the question of whether or not punishment came more swiftly and with less hesitation to women.

Lapp makes a couple of other interesting points about the role and status of women in the Mennonite Church USA. According to her reckoning, there were fewer women in leadership positions in 2014 than there had been before the merger. For those women who were in leadership, she felt the prospects were not good, claiming that opportunity for women “for the most part ends in the small local congregation.” One can assume she is not referring to the type of congregations that supported the women she mentioned earlier. She acknowledges that there are women in leadership positions at the denominational level, but that “they are not the lead executives.” She has particularly harsh words for the denomination when discussing Elizabeth Soto Albrecht – the moderator of the denomination at the time, and Patricia Shelly, the moderator-elect. Lapp is quick to point out that while these are important elected positions, they

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<sup>344</sup> Cynthia Lapp, “Do Women Cause MC USA Anxiety?”

are unpaid. “Is this progress, or are Elizabeth and Patty called on to clean up the mess that has been created since the merger...”<sup>345</sup>

Cynthia Lapp is clearly not pleased with what she sees as discrimination against women. The line about Albrecht and Shelly “cleaning up the mess” created since the merger brought about by the creation of the Mennonite Church USA warrants a closer look. While it is clear Lapp saw women being called on to do thankless, irritating work, and without pay, she was also not comfortable with the way the new denomination was dealing with women’s issues and questions of sexuality. Perhaps she was longing for a more hierarchical leadership to address these concerns, a position taken by some in almost every conflict in the Mennonite Church USA.

The stories taken from the Mennonite press, and explored in this chapter, are a clear indication that the Mennonite Church USA of the 2010s was experiencing intense struggle. The group was in its second decade of existence by this time and these conflicts cannot be simply brushed aside as a natural part of unification efforts that resolve themselves with time. The disagreements within the denomination represent fundamental differences that threaten the future of the merged group. Rather than resolving themselves, these issues, which had roots that went back further than unification, were intensifying. The debate about homosexual unions was deeply divisive. Disagreement about appropriate roles for women in the church also generated much controversy, and as Cynthia Lapp clearly recognized, was related to the debate over homosexuality. While these issues alone had the potential to destroy the denomination, they also served to highlight another problem – disagreements about polity. Differing expectations about the best way to govern the Mennonite Church USA became painfully obvious as the church

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<sup>345</sup> Cynthia Lapp, “Do Women Cause MC USA Anxiety?”



struggled to respond to differences of opinion on issues of gender and sexuality. This struggle over polity will be explored in the following chapter.

## Chapter 7 – Mennonite Church USA and the Struggle Over Polity

Over the past century Mennonites, particularly those from the Mennonite Church, the General Conference Mennonite Church, and the successor to those two groups, the Mennonite Church USA, have struggled with the same issues that have absorbed America more generally: the use of war to resolve fundamental moral and political conflicts, as discussed in both Chapters 3 and 5, issues of social justice, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 6, and finally, confronting the systemic abuse of individuals by those authorized to nurture and protect them, which will be explored in this chapter.<sup>346</sup> Ultimately, facing all of those issues brought the conversation back to reviewing the rules by which the Mennonite community itself – particularly in the Mennonite Church USA – should be governed. These arguments about polity crystallized as the Mennonite Church USA rapidly found itself in the declining stage of the life cycle of religious organizations. In order to understand the near constant conflict in the Mennonite Church USA, a discussion of the ideas each former denomination brought to the union over issues of governance is key. Their disparate ideas on proper polity are foundational for explaining why other conflicts proved almost unsolvable.

This chapter examines the nuances of the debate about polity in the Mennonite Church USA, not only from the perspective of the leaders of the denomination, but also from rank-and-

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<sup>346</sup> For a through discussion of the debate on the morality of war in the United States, see James M. Volo, *A History of War Resistance in America* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2010); for a discussion of involvement in social justice activism in the United States, see Catherine Corrigan-Brown, *Patterns of Protest: Trajectories of Participation in Social Movements* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012.) Although this is sociological work, it provides a clear sense that activism for social justice concerns have been a central feature of American life.; for a discussion of systemic abuse in a religious setting, see Donald B. Cozzens, *Sacred Silence: Denial and Crisis in the Church* (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 2020.) While the Catholic Church has not been the only religious group plagued by abuse allegations, it has perhaps been the most high-profile example.

file members who expressed their concerns in the Mennonite press and blogosphere. I have made use of insights about polity gleaned from Stephanie Krehbiel's work on the intersection of pacifism, gender, and sexuality. Her work also explores issues of sexual abuse, another concern directly impacting church governance. The published research of Rachel Waltner Goossen, who was commissioned by the Mennonite Church USA to explore the case of John Howard Yoder, a prominent theologian and a confessed sexual abuser, have also provided a great deal of perspective. I have also made use of a series of newspaper articles about the Yoder case written by Tom Prince, who was granted access to some of Yoder's unpublished and uncirculated writings on issues of sexuality, providing a window into his thinking on sex. I have also included a first-hand account of abuse from a victim who discussed her experiences in an opinion piece for *The Mennonite*.

Unification highlighted differences of opinion that, while not entirely overlooked, had perhaps been brushed over too quickly during the push toward a new unified denomination. As another round of conflict over social justice emerged, the merged group could no longer ignore these differences. At present, the Mennonite Church USA has an Executive Director, Ervin Stutzman, who comes out of the Mennonite Church (as opposed to the General Conference Mennonite Church), and who has written extensively about Mennonite issues in the modern era. The title Executive Director is not Bishop, but some clearly feared that was what it amounted to, putting questions of polity center stage. In the May 2014 issue of *The Mennonite*, C. Norman Kraus, wrote a rather pointed letter to the editor questioning the role of this new position. Kraus was a well-known author, professor, and minister in Mennonite circles. The Kraus surname is common in both Swiss/High German (Mennonite Church) circles as well as in Dutch/Low German (General Conference) circles, though the Low Germans generally add an "e" to the end.

As the spelling implies, Kraus came from a Mennonite Church background, which makes his article all the more interesting, as it clearly presents an argument that many from the old General Conference group, with their tradition of more regional and congregational control, would support.<sup>347</sup>

The title of Kraus's piece makes his position immediately clear –“A New Papal Office?”

He gets immediately to his point:

Do we have a new papal office, namely, “director of Mennonite Church USA”... ..what is the relationship to the office of “moderator of the delegate assembly” and the moderators of our area conferences? Is the office bishop of the national Mennonite church?<sup>348</sup>

His argument gets right to the heart of the varied opinions within the Mennonite Church USA about where governing power should lie.

The fact that he was a product of the Mennonite Church notwithstanding, Kraus's emphasis on “moderator of the delegate assembly” is telling. This implies that decision making should be a shared endeavor, and that the purposes of leadership, as he and many former General Conference leaders would agree, is more referee than final arbiter. His emphasis on “moderators of area conferences” also shows an affinity for more localized control. The fact that the leaders at the conference level are also “moderators” show the authority of the local congregations as well.<sup>349</sup> The office of Bishop had faded in the Mennonite Church in many areas (the Lancaster Conference being a notable exception), and issues such as credentialing had begun to be handled

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<sup>347</sup> “C. Norman Kraus, Professor Emeritus of Religion, Dies at Age 94” Goshen College. News. (accessed September 25, 2020); <https://www.goshen.edu/news/2018/04/16/c-norman-kraus-professor-emeritus-religion-dies-age-94/>

<sup>348</sup> C. Norman Kraus “A New Papal Office?” in *The Mennonite* Vol 17 No 5, May 4, 2014, (accessed September 25, 2020) <https://archive.org/details/mennonite201417unse/page/n241/mode/1up?q=C+norman+kraus>

<sup>349</sup> Bender and Esau. "Ordination."; C. Norman Kraus “A New Papal Office?”

at the level of the area conference. Even so, the Mennonite Church had remained far more episcopal in nature, that is to say, even though the regional conferences were having more of say than a single denominational leader, the idea that decisions from a higher authority – conference leadership with or without a bishop – were binding on all members and member congregations was common. Such was their status at the time of unification.

To provide a sense of the differing notions of appropriate polity, I would offer a statement from Anne Breckbill, an activist connected to the Brethren Mennonite Council on Gay and Lesbian Concerns, an organization that was founded in the 1970s to deal with issues of sexuality in both Mennonite and Church of the Brethren circles.<sup>350</sup> Breckbill had been involved with both Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church congregations. She says, as quoted in Stephanie Krehbiel’s study of the relationship between pacifism and homosexuality in the Mennonite Church USA:

...when a congregation in the General Conference decided to leave their area conference to be independent or go elsewhere, their parting message was “We don’t agree with you.” When this happened in MC congregations, the message was “God doesn’t agree with you.”<sup>351</sup>

To put an even finer point on it, I offer the explanation given by Su Flickinger, another Mennonite, quoted in the same study:

Mennonite Church folks were much more aware of what their leadership might say or think about what was going on, and the General Conference folks [were] really impatient

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<sup>350</sup> Stephanie Krehbiel, “Pacifist Battlegrounds: Violence, Community, and the Struggle for LGBTQ Justice in the Mennonite Church USA” PhD Dissertation, (University of Kansas, 2015,) 44.

<sup>351</sup> Anne Breckbill, interviewed by Stephanie Krehbiel, quoted in Krehbiel, “Pacifist Battlegrounds,” 50.

with that. It was like, no, we can make that decision, we don't have to go check it out with anybody.<sup>352</sup>

Clearly, it had been easier for those congregations and individuals with significant differences of practice and opinion to remain a part of the General Conference Mennonite community, especially when compared to the Mennonite Church. Remember, the Mennonite Church had already experienced a rash of congregations leaving their fold in the decades preceding the merger— something not seen on a large scale in the General Conference. These varied notions of how to deal with disagreement did not simply disappear with the official arrival of the Mennonite Church USA.

Kraus appears to be looking for the same level of freedom the former General Conference denomination had possessed in this new unified body and apparently feared that an “executive director” was a clear threat to that. This argument, coming as it does from a Mennonite Church perspective, again calls to mind a phenomenon I discussed in the debate on homosexuality – namely the added confusion of progressives and conservatives from two different groups coming together with two different ideas about proper denominational structure. This meshing of varied theological views with distinct ideas about governance, in effect, makes four different combinations possible: 1) affirming same-sex relationships in a way that is binding on all (progressive/episcopal), 2) non affirming in a way binding on all (conservative/episcopal), 3) affirming, but not binding on all (progressive/congregational), and 4) non affirming, but not binding on all (conservative/congregational). Disagreements over polity had the potential to allow people to mix and match theology and preferred church structure, and to advocate for a

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<sup>352</sup> Su Flickinger, interviewed by Amy Short, video recording, Riverdale, MD, Hun3 4, 2012, quoted in Stephanie Krehbiel, “Pacifist Battlegrounds: Violence, Community, and the Struggle for LGBTQ Justice in the Mennonite Church USA” PhD Dissertation, (University of Kansas, 2015,) 50.

position that more clearly fit their ideals and agendas. While this has a certain appeal for people who like options, it makes creating a unified body all the more difficult. Either set of differing opinions by themselves would be difficult, but with both sets of differences meshed, the potential for conflict grows exponentially. Kraus's position on governing structure is a clear indication of how the merger allowed interesting new possibilities for those unhappy with some aspect of the original denomination from which they came. It also showcases the difficulties the Mennonite Church USA faces.

Though his language is strident – at one point he asks if “we have a new Vatican with a small v?” – Kraus finds himself drawn back to the more polite form of Mennonite disagreement, offering something of an olive branch to those he might have offended: “I have great respect for the skill and dedication of Stutzman.” Nonetheless, after making clear that he is not impugning the character of the Executive Director, he maintains his position clearly through his choice of words:

...are we not loading an institutional position with official authority that our polity does not accommodate? Are we not confounding a bishop's role with an executive's role? We say something about our ecclesiology [theology of church leadership, among other things] when we designate the executive of the board *staff* as executive director of the church.<sup>353</sup>

Kraus was careful not to question the sincerity or motives of the person filling the executive director position, and I want to afford him the same courtesy. Even so, given his background, and the well-known difference of opinion about episcopal versus congregational style governance in the Mennonite Church USA, one wonders if perhaps Kraus was subconsciously seeking support from former General Conference leaders and members in

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<sup>353</sup> C. Norman Kraus “A New Papal Office?”

preventing the creation of a structure he had hoped to be rid of when his denomination of origin transitioned out of existence.

Kraus's alarm did not go unchallenged. Elizabeth Soto Albrecht, who was then moderator, and Ed Diller, a former moderator, responded to Kraus's fear for their position a few months later with their own letter, bearing a title as direct as his had been: "No Papal Office." They stated their case forcefully – "...there is no papal office in Mennonite Church USA." They proceed with a description of the duties of the Executive Director, along with a substantive explanation of the bylaws of the denomination, a chronology of when and how they were created, and assurances that they were made by delegates – showing that individual input, the very thing Kraus feared might be lost, was very much a part of the new polity. These denominational leaders acknowledge that there was disagreement but urged continued dialogue and respect. Soto and Diller close by saying that concerns about Stutzman should be directed to him, or to the executive committee through the moderator. Stressing the role of the moderator in addressing concerns about the role of Executive Director was likely intended to assuage fears of taking an overly hierarchical approach. Nevertheless, the fact that the authors first directed concern over the Executive Director *to* the Executive Director likely negated any impact their statement on contacting the moderator might have had.<sup>354</sup> Questions about final authority came into sharp relief as the newly formed denomination confronted an inherited history of sexual abuse.

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<sup>354</sup> Elizabeth Soto Albrecht and Ed Diller "No Papal Office" in *The Mennonite* Vol 17 No 8, August 2014, 4.



## **Sexual Abuse**

The pressure to reconsider modes of self-government pressed down upon the Mennonite Church USA for another reason – one that it shared with other religious groups – the increased acknowledgement of the practice and concealment of sexual abuse. How could a culture of secrecy be ended and replaced with a culture of accountability in the newly formed hierarchy of the denomination? Perhaps the most high-profile example of sexual abuse among Mennonites prior to the merger came from within the Mennonite Church – the case of John Howard Yoder. Yoder was a well-known Mennonite theologian and professor. Though his abuse took place before the merger, it was an issue that the Mennonite Church USA felt they must address – both as it touched on Yoder specifically, and on sexual harassment and abuse more broadly.

In 2013 the Mennonite Church USA formed a panel to deal with sexual abuse issues. The panel was called a Discernment Group on Sexual Abuse and the Church, and it maintains an active page on the official website of the Mennonite Church USA. As of March 2021, the group listed seven members. Shortly after the group was formed, members asked Rachel Waltner Goossen, a professor at a non-church affiliated university, to write a scholarly account detailing the systematic abuse committed by John Howard Yoder, to explore how and why mistakes were made, and to find ways to prevent further abuse. The product of her research resulted in the article “‘Defanging the Beast’: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder’s Sexual Abuse.” In 2016 she wrote another article based on her research entitled “Mennonite Bodies: Sexual

Ethics: Women Challenge John Howard Yoder” which was more widely disseminated as it ran across multiple platforms.<sup>355</sup>

Goossen asserts long term negligence on the part of Mennonites in the opening of her article, though she acknowledges improvement in their response. “...Mennonite organizations, long insensitive to the harm associated with sexual abuse, now promote policies aimed at prevention.” The author posits her research in the context of feminist literature showing sexual abuse as not only an individual trauma, but also a public health concern – one that is connected to gender related power dynamics. In her estimation, the patriarchal nature of traditional Mennonite culture aided and abetted Yoder in his decades long pattern of abuse. She provides a brief but clear summary of Yoder’s misdeeds, followed by an explanation of how the survivors of his abuse were ultimately able to bring about some of the reforms that led to the creation of a formal group within the (new) denomination to deal with sexual abuse, even though it was not realized until a decade and half after Yoder’s death.<sup>356</sup>

Yoder was a well-known theologian who had gained widespread fame and admiration for his peace work, both inside and outside Mennonite circles. Admiration for Yoder's theological reputation and for his activism in the service of nonviolence was so strong that he was able to secure a tenured position at Notre Dame that also allowed him to concurrently serve on the faculty of Goshen Biblical Seminary. It was at Goshen that the abuse first came to light, though

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<sup>355</sup> Rachel Waltner Goossen “Mennonite Bodies: Sexual Ethics: Women Challenge John Howard Yoder” in *Journal of Mennonite Studies* Vol 34, 2016, 247-259; This same article ran on Features Post, TheMennonite.org August 11, 2016, (accessed September 03, 2020) <https://themenonite.org/feature/mennonite-bodies-sexual-ethics-women-challenge-john-howard-yoder/> , as well as AnabaptistWorld.org August 11, 2016. (accessed September 24, 2020); <https://anabaptistworld.org/mennonite-bodies-sexual-ethics-women-challenge-john-howard-yoder/> ; Discernment Group On Sexual Abuse and the Church, Mennonite Church USA. (accessed September 24/2020) <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/resource-portal/resource/discernment-group-on-sexual-abuse-and-the-church/>

<sup>356</sup>Rachel Waltner Goossen “Mennonite Bodies”

it would continue at Notre Dame as well. His goal, in his own words, was to “defang the beast.” According to his understanding, the “beast” was sexual repression. Supposedly, inspired by the sexual revolution, he set out to “help” women overcome their sexual inhibitions.<sup>357</sup>

In 1992, Tom Price wrote a series of articles about the accusations brought against John Howard Yoder that were published in the *Elkhart Truth*, the local newspaper for Elkhart, Indiana, home to a large Mennonite community near Goshen College. In the July 15 piece, Prince attempts to set the abuse within Yoder’s theological framework of sexuality by exploring some of his unpublished memos and manuscripts on the subject. Yoder seemingly attempted to recast the meaning of Matthew 5:28: “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”<sup>358</sup>

According to Yoder’s understanding, adultery of the heart was seeing the subject of sexual attraction as “an object instead of person.” According to that line of reasoning, at least according to Yoder, if he considered women to be his “sisters” and thus as persons and not just sex objects, he could be very physically familiar with them, as long as there was no actual “intercourse.” To him, acceptable interactions included nudity and physical touch, though it later became clear that despite his supposed line that should not be crossed, sexual intercourse, as commonly understood, had indeed occurred.<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> Rachel Waltner Goossen “Mennonite Bodies”; Mark Thiessen Nation, “Yoder, John Howard (1927-1997).” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. August 2019. (accessed September 24/2020) [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Yoder,\\_John\\_Howard\\_\(1927-1997\)&oldid=166420](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Yoder,_John_Howard_(1927-1997)&oldid=166420)

<sup>358</sup> Tom Price, “Yoder’s Actions Frame in Writings” in *The Elkhart Truth*, July 15, 1992. PeaceTheology.net, John Howard Yoder’s Sexual Misconduct – Part Four. (accessed, October 14,2020) <https://peacetheology.net/john-h-yoder/john-howard-yoder%E2%80%99s-sexual-misconduct%E2%80%94part-four/>

<sup>359</sup> Tom Price, “Yoder’s Actions Frame in Writings”; Stephanie Krehbiel, “Pacifist Battlegrounds,” 153.

Yoder was approaching 50 at the time he began to engage in this abuse. He tended to target young women, whose backgrounds had stressed the importance of deference to both authority and age. According to one victim, one of his favorite lines of approach was to say something along the lines of:

We are on the cutting edge. We are developing some new models for the church. We are part of this grand, noble experiment. The Christian church will be indebted to us for years to come...

The abuse continued until eight women finally brought formal accusations in the early 1990s when Yoder was in his third decade of predatory sexual behavior. There had been several informal reports to the administration at Goshen Biblical Seminary. Sadly, many of his victims ended up leaving the area, and even the Mennonite Church over the trauma of Yoder's actions, as well as the dismissive treatment they had received from leadership at Goshen during the period when most of the abuse was occurring. This is, in microcosm, an example of the Mennonite propensity to simply leave after a period of polite conflict, rather than press for what they believed to be right.<sup>360</sup>

Despite complaints from students, he was allowed to remain at Goshen until 1984, when he was forced to resign, although his severance agreement allowed him to maintain secrecy about the reason for his departure, which left his reputation intact, and allowed him to maintain his position at Notre Dame. His predatory behavior continued at Notre Dame, and he maintained a high profile. In fact, he was the president of the Society of Christian Ethics within three years of leaving Goshen. Eventually, there were threats of lawsuits from Notre Dame students. The

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<sup>360</sup> Tom Price, "Yoder's Actions," Mennonite Bodies: Sexual Ethics: Women Challenge John Howard Yoder. Features Post, TheMennonite.org August 11/2016. (accessed September 03, 2020) <https://themennonite.org/feature/mennonite-bodies-sexual-ethics-women-challenge-john-howard-yoder/>

actions taken at Notre Dame, coupled with more women coming forward, led the Indiana-Michigan Conference of the Mennonite Church to begin a disciplinary process with Yoder that lasted from 1992-1996.<sup>361</sup>

During that time, some of the women who had pushed for accountability were blamed for the things that Yoder had publicly apologized for, and they stood accused of destroying a “good man” and his family. Many in the Mennonite community felt he had lent credibility to Mennonites by the positive response his writings had received. Supporters of Yoder also applauded the acceptance given by other Christians groups to the idea that Yoder was a spokesman for Christendom at large, and not just Mennonites. At the end of the process, the conference encouraged him to “use his gifts of writing and *teaching*.” And indeed, he did enter the classroom again at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary the semester before his 1997 death.<sup>362</sup> The animus these women received, coupled with a disciplinary procedure that would *encourage* a sexual predator of three decades to return to the classroom, (and the fact that an institution would accept him in that capacity), do indeed indicate that sexual abuse is not just a personal tragedy, and that the power dynamics that allow such abuse, as feminist literature highlights, were alive and well, among Mennonites.

Even as the Discernment Group was tasking Goossen with her research into John Howard Yoder, there were those voicing the opinion that nothing more needed to be said. Take these excerpts from a letter in *The Mennonite* in the summer of 2014, entitled “Too Many Pages About Yoder” as an example:

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<sup>361</sup> Rachel Waltner Goossen “Mennonite Bodies,”; Nation, “Yoder, John Howard (1927-1997).”

<sup>362</sup> Rachel Waltner Goossen “Mennonite Bodies,”; Nation, “Yoder, John Howard (1927-1997); “Stephanie Krehbiel, Pacifist Battlefields,” 138.

Being a member of the male persuasion, I hesitate to comment... ..but I will anyway. He [Yoder] has been gone now for 17 years. He apologized and asked for forgiveness (What happened to “70 X 7”?) There have been many, many pages already given to this. I’m having trouble understanding what’s to be achieved by perpetuating this unsavory story.<sup>363</sup>

D. Lowell Nissley, the author of this piece, is referring to forgiving people repeatedly as described in Matthew 18:21-22.

Concern over these issues has persisted. In 2017, Audrey Metz wrote an opinion piece indicating that abuse and sexism were continuing in Mennonite circles. She related how she and her husband had decided to leave their Mennonite congregation of many years after an incident that she characterizes as a taunting remark, made with an attitude of power over her, by a man who “sidled up” to her while she was waiting to be seated in church. While she does not elaborate on what was said, there are hints that it may have involved issues related to women in leadership roles. Whatever it was, it was clearly disconcerting, as was his close physical proximity during the encounter. Rather than have a confrontation, she and her family decided to find another church.

We leave wondering how such a situation can still exist in the Mennonite church – how there can still be men who feel they have a right to belittle and taunt women, make inappropriate remarks, question women’s roles? How are there men who still feel women should depend on them for self-worth, while at the same time professing to be followers of Christ, who was a respecter and champion of women?<sup>364</sup>

Metz questions whether it is her responsibility to publicly take to task an individual who engages in “very secret harassment of women... ..simply because he can.” She acknowledges that her decision might be construed as “running away” and that others might have made another

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<sup>363</sup> D. Lowell Nissley, “To Many Pages About Yoder” in *The Mennonite* Vol 17 No 8, August 4, 2014.

<sup>364</sup> Audrey Metz “When Church Hurts” Opinion Posts, The Mennonite.org (accessed August 03,2020) <https://themennonite.org/opinion/when-church-hurts/>

decision. She also mentions the dismissive responses she expected would be made in an attempt to excuse the man and encourage her patience, had she pursued the issue.<sup>365</sup> While this episode can be viewed as a sad commentary on the lack of progress made by the Discernment Committee on Sexual Abuse and the Church, it is also indicative of the Mennonite response to conflict in general. Time and again, we have seen Mennonites leaving the parent group when they feel that they cannot prevail. Although the stakes are certainly higher in cases of sexual harassment/abuse, the tactic, at the personal level as demonstrated by Metz in this episode, is reminiscent of the behavior of those I have termed “Mennonite Fundamentalists” who left the Mennonite Church, sometimes by congregation and sometimes by conference, when they sensed that the old standards of dress and behavior would no longer be mandatory. Simply put, Mennonites do not do conflict well. Perhaps that is a natural outcome of their traditionally pacifist stance. Whatever the case, it helps to explain the rapid disintegration of the Mennonite Church USA in the face of social upheaval.

Ms. Metz chose not to challenge a situation in which she felt she might not be heard, and that is certainly her prerogative. And, while the details of her encounter with her harasser are not explicitly stated, it would appear they were not as physically violating as what was experienced at the hands of John Howard Yoder, but there are troubling similarities that need to be addressed. First, there is the private and relatively secretive nature of the harassment. Then there is the seeming impunity of an aggressor who believed he would not be held to account. And finally, there is the issue of a victim who clearly believed that as well. It harkens back to Rachel Waltner Goossen’s account of women who left the Mennonite Church because of their experiences as victims of sexual abuse. While it is not clear whether Metz is leaving the denomination, the

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<sup>365</sup> Audrey Metz “When Church Hurts.”

motivation for her departure from her congregation is the same – leaving an institution that either cannot or will not protect them. Metz wonders how people who do not view equality between the sexes as a given can exist in the Mennonite church in this era of history. Given the diversity of opinion on any number of issues, not the least of which concern gender, particularly within the fold of the former General Conference, that such a position of equality is not universally subscribed to is hardly surprising.

In addition to unresolved conflict on a number of issues, including sexuality, both the former Mennonite Church and the former General Conference Mennonite Church brought very different notions of what the leadership structure of the new group should look like. Those differences of opinion on polity, when coupled with internal disagreements among the two former denominations on a host of other issues, laid the groundwork for strife and numerical decline. The attempt of the Mennonite Church USA to tackle the inherited issue of sexual abuse simply highlighted the disparate opinions on how the group should be governed and exacerbated their decline.



## Conclusion

The merger of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church at the turn of the twenty-first century, and the subsequent and rapid decline of this new body – the Mennonite Church USA – highlights several themes from Mennonite history. At a time of great social upheaval, these currents of Mennonite history – competing impulses within Mennonite communities, if you will – collided in an ill-fated attempt at unity, one that left the remains of the two former denominations in positions weaker than they were before the merger. Exploring the disparate histories of these two related denominations, as well as the conflicts that occurred as they came together, helps distill a sometimes-ambiguous notion of Mennonite identity and community. It touches on the malleability of community and says something about the ways in which issues of identity (both individual and group), history, morality, authority, and justice intersect, and how conflicts between these issues are resolved. Such questions are of prime concern to Mennonites, but these same questions must be addressed by other religious groups, as well as by society at large. In an era of great political turmoil when questions of social justice have again moved to the fore of public concern in ways not seen in half a century, these are issues of great import.

Within Mennonite circles, there have always been diverse ideas about the exact nature of identity and community. Sometimes these conflicting notions have been successfully held in tension, and at other times they have resulted in schisms both large and small. Among the many points of contention among Mennonites, there have been three overarching themes: (1) Mennonites have long struggled with how correct belief and appropriate practice relate to one another. (2) There has often been conflict between conservatism and activism in Mennonite

circles. (3) Finally, the completing impulses to maintain a separate identity and to engage with the wider world have often led to disagreement.

After the arrival of the Mennonites in America, the divisions that began in Europe continued, as explored in Chapter 1. This process continues to this day. Because of early (and sometimes later) persecution, Mennonites were frequently on the move, which led to linguistic and social isolation, such that in many ways, culture and religious faith became so intertwined that an ethnic component to Mennonite identity developed. While hardly unique to Mennonites – consider the Greek culture and the Orthodox faith, or Catholicism and Italian or Irish identity, or the Scots Irish and Presbyterianism – I would assert that this conflating of ethnic identity and religion has had more of an influence on Mennonites than on many groups. When Mennonites arrived in America, they did not all share the same ethnic identity, nor did they all arrive at the same time, and those differences came into play with the merger that created the Mennonite Church USA. Members of the former Mennonite Church were overwhelmingly of Swiss/High German heritage, while those of the General Conference group were overwhelmingly of Dutch/Low German/Russian heritage. Their differing ethnicities, as well as differing immigration dates, made these two groups distinct both in their eyes, and in the eyes of casual observers. This too may have had an impact on the success of the Mennonite Church USA, though different polities proved far more significant.

The Swiss/South German contingent that made up the bulk of the Mennonite Church arrived early, and most of the divisions in that group happened on American soil, such that by the time of the merger, there was perhaps more unity of belief and practice among those remaining in the Mennonite Church than there was among the General Conference – most of the

dissenters in the Mennonite Church had already left before the early twenty-first century unification. Even so, the Mennonite Church was not a monolith, but much closer to it than the General Conference group, and that strong sense of cohesion of belief and practice remained appealing to members from that group. The differences within the Mennonite Church were minor enough that those remaining could continue to work together. The Dutch/Low German/Russian contingent arrived in America much later and had already undergone a major division while in Russia. These Mennonites had more liberal attitudes in intellectual matters and a greater willingness to engage with government, and these features served to heighten differences between the two groups, with most of the more recent arrivals uniting with the General Conference Mennonite Church, while the majority of the early Swiss/South German Mennonites remained with the Mennonite Church, even though the General Conference group had its origins among the Swiss/South Germans. Ethnic identity had become tied not only to a particular religion, but also to specific denominations. Even more important, however, was the General Conference toleration of differences of doctrine and practice. As has been shown repeatedly, the General Conference was able to remain united even amidst major difference in belief – differences that would never have withstood the test of time in the former Mennonite Church.

As detailed in Chapter 2, because of their varied experiences, both in Europe and America, the two groups had developed different styles of church organization. The Mennonite Church came to be dominated by a top-down episcopal structure, while the General Conference was organized in a more congregational manner such that the local church made most decisions, and the differences between congregations could be fairly significant. In the Mennonite Church, those who disagreed with orders from their bishops could, and did leave. The General

Conference Mennonite Church was much more loosely organized, and if an individual member disagreed with certain practices in one congregation, it was easier to simply move to another, as opposed to leaving the denomination. This “go-along-to-get along” approach helped to prevent churches from splintering off from the General Conference (unlike the Mennonite Church), but this difference meant that at the time of the merger there was significantly more variety of thought and practice in the General Conference when compared to the Mennonite Church, and that had serious ramifications, both as a standalone issue, as well as a secondary component in many other disputes. This contributed to the decline in membership in the Mennonite Church USA.

On the surface, at the time of merger, the two groups looked remarkably similar. Both had largely lost the outer trappings of being “other” – for reasons discussed in Chapter 3. That meant loss of the German language for the General Conference group, where separation in matters of dress had never been a major issue, and loss of distinct dress in the Mennonite Church where the German language had been replaced much earlier. Both groups largely looked like mainstream Americans – their differences were real, but more easily overlooked in the runup to unification. The excitement generated by the prospect of a merger that would seemingly leave these Mennonite bodies a larger and stronger group made it easy to ignore issues of polity, though there were those who sounded the alarm of the possible problems these differing ideas of governance might give rise to.

Both groups were influenced by the fundamentalist movement of the early twentieth century, but that influence played out differently. In the Mennonite Church, perhaps because of their more unified form of government, doctrinal purity became a major issue, and led to the rise

of Mennonite Fundamentalism. This Mennonite Fundamentalism combined the conservative tendencies and literalist approach to the Bible, of mainstream inspired American fundamentalism with a heavy dose of Mennonite distinctives – in this case most noticeably in matters of dress. Of course, not all in the Mennonite Church were as strict about this, and by the 1940s there was pushback, such that some in the Mennonite Church were advocating for what was called the Anabaptist Vision – a step away from legalism and separation and toward recovering what proponents saw as the ethos of their origin – more emphasis on behavior and motive, and less on outward marks of distinction and arguments about the finer points of doctrine.

The result was that by the 1950s and 1960s there were multiple schools of thought in the Mennonite Church. Those who clung more closely to Mennonite Fundamentalism favored the approach that peacemaking meant not serving in the military and little else, and that justice was not acting unjustly in your personal relationships. This is not to say there were no means of outreach among this group – there were. The Fresh Air Program for inner city youth was a shining example. Overall, this group within the Mennonite Church played a small role in advocacy for racial justice and opposition to the war in Vietnam. To a much smaller degree, you had individuals who had given up on the peace doctrine and had internalized mainstream American style fundamentalism – this position was more prevalent in the General Conference group than in the Mennonite Church. Still another wing, those who favored the Anabaptist Vision, were actively involved in protests and activism around multiple issues, often to the chagrin of their more conservative brethren. Those most determined to retain the strict standards set in place in the 1920s – the Mennonite Fundamentalists – slowly began to leave the denomination. Once again, for those who possessed deeply held convictions about such issues as dress and separation from the world, it was not enough to maintain them in their congregation –

they felt they must separate from the larger body in order to remain pure – a notion that would have seemed foreign to General Conference Mennonites.

The picture is a bit more complicated in the General Conference Mennonite Church. For reasons covered in Chapters 2 and 3, these mostly Low German Mennonites had suffered far greater persecution during the World Wars and had been less uniform in maintaining a pacifist stance, despite the fact that this had been their primary motivation for coming to America in the late nineteenth century. Their congregational structure made this all much easier. For this and other reasons, their experience with fundamentalism, as well as with the rise of the Anabaptist Vision resulted in a slightly different regrouping. Because they were less distinct, they had a less visible Mennonite Fundamentalism to display – for the most part they had always looked similar to their neighbors, though there were those who clung tenaciously to pacifism and shunned activism. There were also advocates of the Anabaptist Vision, and like their counterparts in the Mennonite Church they were active in the civil rights and anti-war movements as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively. There was also a third contingent among the Low German General Conference Mennonites that had a much smaller counterpart in the Mennonite Church – people who had adopted mainstream American fundamentalism. The presence of this third group was particularly strong around the periphery of their area of geographical strength. Because of their relative isolation from other Mennonites, they had intermarried with their non-Mennonite neighbors to a much greater degree, and earlier, than those in other locations. Although many of the spouses became Mennonite, there was a clear shift toward greater acculturation, such that eventually there were individuals and congregations that were perfectly comfortable with members joining the military, and whose conservative political values led them to distrust, and sometime oppose, the social justice movements of the 1950s and 1960s, all the

while maintaining a “Mennonite” identity. This variety was made possible because of their congregational polity. All three groups could peacefully coexist (for the most part) under a common umbrella, resulting in a level of diversity that would have been almost impossible in the Mennonite Church, which valued uniformity to a far greater degree – at least in doctrinal matters.

By the 1980s, most of those strongly committed to Mennonite Fundamentalism had left the Mennonite Church either individually, as congregations, or even as regional conferences. The official policy of the denomination had moved beyond simple pacifism into active promotion of peace and the activism that sometimes entailed. Of course, not all members agreed, but few complained, as it did not directly affect them – it was not a deeply enough held personal conviction to them to warrant leaving. Those from the Mennonite Church tradition who were opposed to activism as a core ideal had already departed for more doctrinally “pure” groups. In the General Conference, those promoting an active and activist peace stance were perhaps even more vocal, but because of their congregational governing style there was great diversity of opinion and practice. It was against this backdrop that serious negotiations about a merger began in the latter part of the twentieth century. While there was initially more enthusiasm for the move on the General Conference side, the numerically smaller group, there was relatively little active opposition from the Mennonite Church, and in 2002, the two groups officially became one – the Mennonite Church USA.

As I have detailed in Chapters 6 and 7, problems arose almost from the start of the merger, and many of them centered around issues that neither group had resolved coming into the union. These problems were only exacerbated by different expectations about how the

denominations should be governed. Indeed, the disparate polities of the two groups, and the ideas about the nature of Mennonite community they engendered, became in many ways the defining point of conflict over the social issues that roiled America, as well as Mennonites. Many from the former Mennonite Church seemed to desire and advocate for a more centralized approach than even what they had known before, while many from the former General Conference group seemed content with their old policy of allowing regional conferences, as well as individual congregations, to treat statements from the denomination as suggestions that could be ignored, rather than as hard and fast policy regulations. Issues of social justice made clear that it would be nearly impossible to please both sides. As is often the case in such untenable situations, neither side was truly pleased.

While the ordination of women and sexual abuse, as well as questions of denominational structure and authority, were hotly contested, perhaps the most divisive and most debated issue was how to deal with homosexuality, as described in Chapter 6. Indeed, all of the other issues almost invariably managed to link back to this debate in some way, as I have shown. This is hardly surprising given that this was a major national conversation at the same time, and it was dividing many denominations. The increased use of social media, and the fact that the official denominational periodical, *The Mennonite*, made use of blog posts on their website, allowed people to debate these issues in a much more rapid and direct manner than they could via traditional print methods, although that avenue was utilized as well. One could make the argument that blogs and comment sections draw the most strident opinions. While I would agree that it is an easier avenue than the traditional monthly periodical, I would also argue that the people willing to negotiate the print medium are likely to be even more strident, if for no other reason than the higher threshold for participation. It must also be remembered that the dispute



between progressive and conservative elements from both previous denominations were being played out against a backdrop of conflict over polity. The former groups would have, and had, answered questions such as these differently, with the Mennonite Church having splintered over such issues, while the General Conference had been less schismatic by accepting more diversity of thought and practice. These controversial social issues combined with very different ideas about denominational structure were playing out at the very same time that technology and social media were making it easier for those displeased to make their voice heard and to find common allies. It is hardly surprising that the denomination is faltering. Many mainline Christian denominations are fracturing and declining over these same social issues, and they generally lack the long-standing fundamental differences of opinion about polity that must be dealt with in the Mennonite Church USA. When such questions do arise in mainline churches, they are generally a result of social change. Among Mennonites, these polity disagreements preceded the conflict over social issues.

As I discussed in the first chapter, one can look at religious groups through the lens of a lifecycle. The higher the expectations from members, at least to a point, and the more black-and-white the belief system, the more attractive the religious group is for many people. At the same time, a more complex approach to questions of belief and behavior requires more thought and deliberation than many are willing to exert. Then there are those who fear grey areas and find nuance to be a synonym for weak doctrine. The decline of the mainlines and the growth of nondenominational and mega churches, fits this approach, and I agree with it in principle. One could make the same argument about Mennonites – the more conservative groups are growing fairly rapidly, and the new “liberal” denomination is in decline. A closer look, however, complicates that generalization. The populations among more conservative Mennonites – think

horse and buggy – are indeed growing, but it is from natural increase, and such large families as are typical in many of these groups allow for a certain number to leave the fold and still maintain a healthy growth rate without proselytizing.

In some ways the Mennonite Church USA, and the previous denominations that combined to create it, fit the religious lifecycle model. As has been demonstrated, both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church were already in decline when they merged, and that decline continued after the merger. In this, they fit squarely within the framework presented by Finke and Stark. Other aspects make their experience unique, however. Of course, most denominations in protestant Christianity were started by crusaders of one flavor or another, but the radical nature of the commitment of the early Anabaptists, as well as the strong ethnic component to membership, and the long history of major migration, make them something of an anomaly. Other ethnic religious groups also have dramatic migration stories, such as Armenian Orthodox Church, but these tend to be conservative, and with less of an outward focus. There are certainly Mennonites who fit that definition as well, but that is not the case with the Mennonite Church USA – it is one of the few “ethnic” churches that actively engages in outreach to people outside their group.

In their journey toward union, the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church played out a pattern that bears some resemblance to the religious group life cycle theory, but other elements are distinctively different. There has long been a tension in the Mennonite world between the radical roots of the group, and the activism that can engender, and a concern with doctrinal purity. When Daniel Kauffman laid down the law regarding separation from the world in the 1920s, he was, in many ways, following the path that Jacob Ammann trod

over two hundred year earlier when he declared that his followers should use hooks and eyes instead of buttons. When Chester Wenger went against the rules of his church to preside over his son's wedding, he was promoting actions and relationships over policies, just as Harold S. Bender did when he gently challenged the legalism of Daniel Kauffman in the 1940s with his paper "The Anabaptist Vision." Wenger volunteered to his conference that he had taken part in a forbidden ceremony even though they might never have found out otherwise and might not have pursued the matter even if they had. By politely bringing it to their attention, Wenger was following in the footsteps of older Anabaptists who put themselves at risk to do what they felt was right. Activism is in the DNA of Mennonites, but so too is conservatism. A quick review of the many splinter groups to come from the Mennonite tradition would seem to indicate, at least numerically, that the conservatives and not the activists are taking the lead.

Any exploration of the Mennonite Church USA must include a discussion of polity. The two bodies that came together to create the merged denomination entered the union with distinct ideas about how the body would and should be governed. Because those ideas were in opposition to one another, little could be done to address the disparate views on the social issues that were fraying the fabric of the new body. It is unreasonable to expect disputes to be peacefully resolved when the opposing sides cannot agree on the method for settling them, and that is the situation the Mennonite Church USA found itself in. Disputes over questions of polity have a long history in Christian circles. Richard Hooker, a leader in the early Church of England, explored issues of church polity in the late 1500s, as he sought to counter arguments from the rising Puritan movement about the appropriate form of church government – disputes that encompassed both questions about polity as well as scripture, in some ways prefiguring similar debates in the Mennonite Church USA. Hooker's arguments have been discussed ever

since. Indeed, in 2005, Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and then leader of the world-wide Anglican Communion, was mining Hooker's work for answers, not only to issues of church governance, but also for guidance on issues such as diversity inside and outside the church, as well as problems caused by the conflict between militant Islam and militant Western rationalism in Europe. Questions of polity are of great importance in understanding not only governing structures, but also the communities they give rise to, and the type of diversity they allow for, or discourage. Questions of governance are also sometimes at issue in movement toward the merging of church groups, but not as centrally as in the Mennonite Church USA.<sup>366</sup>

Sadly, despite some early voices advising caution, issues of polity did not receive the attention they needed in the creation of the Mennonite Church USA. Leaders of the move to integrate the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church had explored how the process had been handled in other unified groups such as the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church USA, but those groups did not bring the same sorts of conflicting views on polity that the two groups that made up the Mennonite Church USA did.

What is Mennonite polity? How are Mennonites to be governed, religiously speaking, and what makes someone part of a Mennonite community? The more conservative, and more rapidly growing groups tend to hold to a more authoritarian style – one that often favors a more episcopal polity with a top-down structure. An episcopal polity in and of itself does not necessarily demand uniformity in doctrine – take as an example the Episcopal Church in the United States – a group with great diversity in thought and practice. Even so, such a structure

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<sup>366</sup> Richard Hooker, edited by Arthur Steven McGrade, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity: A Critical Edition with Modern Spelling* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013); Rowan Williams, "Richard Hooker: The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity Revisited," *Ecclesiastical Law Journal*, vol 8, no. 39, July 2006, 382-391.

makes maintaining doctrinal purity, and a closely guarded notion of who is part of the community, possible if that is a group goal. At the same time, a more congregational form of polity makes it much easier to have a wide variety of thought and behavior while remaining part of the overall community. When they merged, many from the Mennonite Church brought their desire for uniformity, while most from the General Conference brought a preference for their tradition of variety. Of course, as discussed in Chapter 6, there was crossover after the merger. Nevertheless, these difference of opinion on governance, and thus what it meant to be part of the community of the Mennonite Church USA, underly the decline of the denomination, and exacerbated the more prominent disputes over social justice issues. Mennonites have always been a numerically small group, and they have been reinventing themselves for the better part of 500 years. It will be interesting to see the final outcome for the Mennonite Church USA. If they do indeed dissolve completely, there are other Mennonite groups they could join. Time will tell when, and if, the activist spirit that has been woven throughout the Anabaptist experience takes hold again, and the polities of what may replace the current group will surely play a determining role in how such activism might be expressed.

It would be easy to step back from this historical record with any number of cynical conclusions about insurmountable differences, lack of good will, injustice, or the seeming impossibility of achieving unity. Such assumptions would be in keeping with the with the spirit of cynicism that has become fashionable in the United States over the last fifty years. There is no doubt that ours is a dark time when both faith and reason are being abused. The outlook for the Mennonite Church USA is not especially promising. Because this has been the story of a Christian community, it seemed altogether fitting to me to end with a few words from scripture. Everyone concerned in this episode holds the Bible in high regard, though they obviously have

different ideas about how it should be used and interpreted. As I thought of ways to close this work, one of the parables of Christ came to mind – the story of a man who attempted to build a tower but was unable to finish. In Luke 14: 28 Christ says: “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?”

In some ways, the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church failed to appropriately count the costs of a merger. They did not adequately think through the implications of what was ultimately a very ambitious undertaking: in merging two denominations, they were creating a new governing structure, with its own strengths, but also with temptations to withdraw into the familiar when the edges of conflict seem to suddenly become sharp. Perhaps at an earlier time unification might have worked. Perhaps there would have then been time to settle into a workable polity before the national storm over homosexuality broke. With an earlier beginning, perhaps the new group would have better been able to chart those troubled waters. Perhaps not. The attempt at unity was admirable. The preparatory work and execution were simply not up to the challenges faced by Mennonites at the start of the twenty first century. Though this merger did not result in the robust denomination that so many had hoped for, we must have the courage to say that this challenge, like others, brought out some examples of what is best in humankind. It has always been so. I believe the moral of this account of human striving through adversity over time is not so much that unity is an impossible goal, as much as it is call for cautious and thorough preparation in future attempts to bring unity – among Mennonites and others.

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