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Mennonite Community congregation, 2003.

Back to the City:

Mennonite Community Church Fresno, California 1954-2004

This is the second part of a two-part article. It is a much abbreviated and revised rendition of Janzen's book, Back to the City: Mennonite Community Church, Fresno, California: 1954-2004. For complete citations, see the book.

by Rod Janzen

In 1983 Mennonite Community called James Wenger to be its fifth full-time minister. His wife Faith played a major role in the Wenger ministry. Wenger proved to be the congregation's longest-tenured leader, and during his pastorate attendance figures moved to their highest level. A year after his arrival, a congregational review process indicated that "resolution" was still needed between "activists" and "tradi-

tionists." Wenger believed that the best way to deal with the problem was to turn the church's attention outward.

Wenger also believed that in a modern urban and suburban environment the church needed to redefine the concept of "neighborhood" or "community." In Wenger's view people in the city rarely attended the same church as their neighbors. Wenger suggested that the church should promote

a sense of "we-ness" via "a community of overlapping communities." A "community" was simply a group of people with whom one liked to associate. The first step in any evangelistic effort, therefore, was to seek out one's friends and associates in a targeted social network sometimes referred to as "friendship evangelism." The people in the church neighborhood were not to be overlooked, but they were not the primary focus of

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the mission of the church.

Wenger was committed to numerical as well as spiritual growth. Of special concern to Wenger was the fact that there was only one high school student in the youth group when he arrived. Also, a large contingent of the church’s sixty regular attenders were employed in skilled working-class jobs. Wenger targeted more professionals to broaden the church’s constituency.

Wenger was the first pastor to confront head-on the issue of congregational identity. He believed that Mennonite Community’s collective self-image was too negative, and noted in a 1986 statement: “We are God’s people, and we can have hope, optimism and enthusiasm for the future.

“...we can have hope, optimism and enthusiasm for the future.”

We should focus not on our problems and weaknesses but on our strengths and resources.”

Wenger himself made a personal commitment to contact all visitors within twenty-four hours. As Wenger put it: “a church that does not have visitors cannot grow”—and so the evangelistic

effort proceeded. In 1988 the average attendance increased by twenty-four people per week. Nine years later the average weekly attendance had expanded to 136.

In Wenger’s view it also was important for the church to establish a connection with the local Hmong immigrant community. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, thousands of Hmong fled from the highlands of Burma, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam to refugee camps in Thailand, where they sought entry to the United States. By the late 1980s nearly 30,000 Hmong had settled in Fresno County.

Mennonite Community’s relationship with Southeast Asian refugees began in 1983 with a number of family sponsorships. Two years later the church secured a Voluntary Service worker to focus on displaced peoples. Wenger then invited the Lao Evangelical Church to use Mennonite Community facilities in exchange for taking care of the buildings and grounds. In early 1988, Wenger engaged pastor Shoua Moua in conversation, and Moua ultimately enrolled in Hesston College’s pastoral ministries program. Upon Moua’s return to Fresno in 1990, the Hmong Mennonite Church was established with 246 people in attendance at the first service.

The next step in the development of the Hmong church was the integration of the congregation’s children into Mennonite Community’s Sunday school program. This continued until the late-1990s, when worship service times caused unworkable conflicts. Mennonite Community also started English language classes and a job assistance and advocacy program.

Never before in the congregation’s history had there been so

many short- and long-term ad hoc committees and outreach endeavors. In all of these projects Wenger was perceived as encouraging, non-intrusive and non-judgmental. Long-time attender Victor Alcazar – who belongs to the Catholic Church, where he continues to attend mass – noted that Mennonite Community was the first Protestant church that did not try to convert him.

Wenger says that one of the characteristics that made Mennonite Community unique was the extensive involvement of women in all aspects of the church’s operation, including the most important church positions. This was not how he found things in other Mennonite churches. As Faith Wenger puts it, “I never felt that there was any gender distinction made in any area of church life.”

It was not always this way. Women’s involvement in leadership was a slow, evolving process. When Mary Koop arrived in Fresno in 1959, she found women

“Wenger promoted the idea of bringing even more women into leadership positions.”

serving only in “minor” positions. This changed in the 1960s and 1970s, when the first females served on the Church Council, as deacons, and eventually as chairs of the congregation. Wenger pushed things a step further by hiring a number of women for ministerial positions.

During the 1980s and 1990s Mennonite Community continued to place significant emphasis on music and the arts. In the traditional services a variety of choral and instrumental groups provided



Voluntary Service workers outing to Yosemite, 1998.

special music while four-part congregational singing was the norm. Sculptor and painter Margaret Hudson provided many innovative ideas for worship in the 1970s and 1980s. Artists Nancy Weinbrenner and Matt Hiebert, along with Faith Wenger and Sylvia Riesen, provided leadership for the imaginative hands-on crafts activities at annual “Family Christmas” events.

An unexpected development in the early 1990s was the arrival of many new members from Mennonite Brethren background, many of whom had associations with Fresno Pacific University. Ex-Mennonite Brethren were captivated by the general informality of church services, the empha-

sis on children, a basic openness to creative experimentation and the presence of a bicultural Sunday school program. It was also a church that lacked sophisticated programming and bureaucratic organizational structures. A side effect of ex-Mennonite Brethren proliferation was an increased professionalization of the congregation.

In the 1990s Mennonite Community also attracted numerous professionals who did not have Mennonite background. These individuals and families came from Episcopalian, Roman Catholic, Baptist and Methodist backgrounds. Most were attracted by

“Most were attracted by Anabaptist theological emphases...”

Anabaptist theological emphases and they provided a rich diversity of ideas and experiences.

James Wenger did not emphasize or participate in social and political action as much as some of the congregation’s previous pastors. However, he actively supported members who did so. The social and the personal dimensions of faith have both been emphasized at Mennonite Community throughout its history. When asked to choose between social action and evangelism on a mid-1980s survey, meeting the needs of the hungry, the ill and the oppressed ranked considerably higher than ministry to the “spiritually lost without Christ.” Yet members also indicated that the “highest” priority for the church was to “win more non-Christians to Christ.”

Into the Future, 1983-Present

In 1998, James and Faith Wenger ended their time of service to Mennonite Community. Ed Cornelsen, a semi-retired minister from Manitoba, served as interim pastor for the next year. With intention, he sought to prepare the congregation for new leadership after such a long time with one individual.

In late 1998 the church called Libby Caes to be its next pastor. Caes was the first female senior

pastor at Mennonite Community, as well as the congregation's first minister without Mennonite denominational or ethnic roots. Caes moved to Fresno with husband Dave (a social worker) and daughter Amy.

Caes was interested in moving the church in more inclusive directions with regard to worship, community service and membership. For the next two and one-half years the congregation engaged in a variety of worship service experiments combining the formal and informal in novel ways. With regard to communion, for example, members were not only asked to observe it more often and to come forward to receive the bread and juice from the deacons (two high church traditions), children of all

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ages were also encouraged to partake (from a bowl of grapes provided for them).

Serious differences of opinion—on a series of issues and practices—created tension between Caes and members of the church, leading to her resignation in the summer of 2001. In the view of Dale Stoltzfus, a Mennonite Church consultant brought in to evaluate the increasingly tense situation, a major problem was the congregation's mixed understanding of pastoral leadership expectations. No angry factions developed in support of one side or another and the lack of division

made it possible to move forward quickly.

Libby Caes was unilaterally recognized for her personal commitment to the faith, her heart for people, her strong support of cultural diversity and ecumenism, and for the close supportive relationships and time-consuming attention she gave to older persons in the congregation (who were some of her strongest supporters).

One important issue raised by Caes during her ministry was the extent to which ethnicity affects theology. This was a significant issue in a church where two-thirds of the members had some Mennonite ethnicity. Many non-ethnics feel that it is difficult to become fully accepted in the Mennonite cultural world. Caes confronted this issue head on.

Most non-ethnic members interviewed, however, do not see the genetic and cultural issue as a particular problem or barrier at Mennonite Community. Michelle Hernandez Wengerd describes a three-step process, whereby at first she found Mennonite rootedness fascinating, then annoying, and finally motivational in terms of recognizing the beauty of her own Mexican culture. Margaret Hudson notes that she has "never felt excluded" at Mennonite Community even though there is an "inner core" that she can never "be part of."

The whole issue of Mennonites and ethnicity is a complicated one. Cultural identity combined with religious affiliation provides a strong sense of rootedness. Mennonite writer John Ruth reminds that the Bible itself is the "story" of God's interaction with a particular ethnic group. Mennonites have resonated with a Biblical narrative that shows God interacting in a special way with a single cultural group.

"...the congregation engaged in a variety of worship service experiments."

Mennonites hold viewpoints (such as pacifism) that have historically alienated them and caused them to turn inward. This phenomenon helped create a singular cultural identity that embodied a collective commitment to non-resistance. Over time, some Mennonites on the West Coast have de-emphasized ethnic identity and thrown out the very belief (pacifism) that caused them the most embarrassment.

Comprised historically of people who represent (predominately) a particular Dutch Low German or Swiss ethnic background, but who as Anabaptists also adhere to a distinctive rendition of Protestant

"One important issue...was the extent to which ethnicity affects theology."

Christianity, Mennonite Community Church has functioned as an ethno-religious spiritual community not unlike the various ethnic congregations of the Pacific Southwest Conference.

After Caes left, Mervin and Jane Dick joined the congregation as an interim pastoral team. The Dicks established an agenda that dealt with issues of collective self-perception, leadership and relationships between the church and the local community. One of the congregational goals was to increase attendance while simul-

taneously retaining an Anabaptist ideological center. Members also wanted a more active youth group, a greater focus on discipleship, more programs for older people, continuation of small groups and an emphasis on peace and social concerns.

Fresno Pacific University English professor Billie Jean Wiebe suggests that Mennonite Community is really just a little rural church that has found itself in the city. In other words, it is a church in which members pitch in to get things done but simultaneously rely heavily on the multifaceted leadership of a full-time pastor. This means that the church rises or falls quickly, both in terms of attendance and general vitality, depending on the pastor.

“The whole issue of Mennonites and ethnicity is a complicated one.”

Rural in its predilections, members tolerate a simple and somewhat mediocre worship space. As is the case in a rural environment, everyone gets involved to make things work instead of employing a professional class to perform specific services. Sunday School teachers and church musicians are unpaid volunteers even though they often are highly trained in the areas in which they work. At times, owing to an inherent spirit of voluntarism, members even help out in areas where they have little or no training.

In keeping with its rural character, Mennonite Community throughout its history has been a small friendly place that is highly informal in organizational structure and worship. The rules are

“...Mennonite Community is really just a little rural church that has found itself in the city.”

not followed rigidly; people are given the freedom to develop all kinds of church programs. Even the simple adobe brick comprising the church's east wall represents the rural past of a church that has never really developed a fully urban identity.

Wiebe also points out that a rural church does not typically show a great deal of interest in local outreach. Although some pastors pushed growth in different ways, a significant majority of members focused instead on the “cradle to grave” aspects of church life. Outreach, when it occurred, tended to deal with non-church entities.

A pastoral search process in winter 2002-2003 led to the selection of Steve Ratzlaff. He arrived in Fresno in September 2003 along with spouse Lynette, an artist, and a college-age son and daughter.

In the view of many church growth experts, congregations such as Mennonite Community will have a hard time surviving in the years ahead. Not willing to meet the perceived interests of Generation X (people born between 1964 and 1982) and Generation Y (those born after 1982) by worshiping to the sound of electric guitars; unwilling to relinquish power to post-Baby Boomer age-groups that are not as interested in denominational theological distinctives, the expectation is that it

will be difficult to find a niche in the competitive world of church politics. The 100-plus members of Mennonite Community Church, however, are not really interested in transforming themselves into a large church with a more generic theological stance.

Mennonite Community Church is a resilient congregation. On a number of occasions, when things looked bleak, the strength of the members carried the church forward. A vital and unwavering commitment to this spiritual community has continuously attracted the attention of new attenders. This buoyancy is part of the fabric of the place.

Members of the church continue to seek God's will as they move forward with optimism. New members continue to be given opportunities to serve. As Victor Alcazar puts it: “If a person has a desire to sing a solo, they're allowed to. If someone wants to tell a children's story, they can. You want to preach? Step right up.”

CORRECTION

In the first part of this article (CMHS Bulletin, No. 43, Spring, 2006) there was a mistake on page 12. The sentence (in the 1st paragraph of the section “A Fresh Start”) should read “Floyd's spouse, Ruth (Nickel) was from nearby Dinuba.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rod Janzen teaches history at Fresno Pacific University, where he holds the position of Distinguished Scholar. Recent books include *The Prairie People: Forgotten Anabaptists* (University of New England Press, 1999) and *The Rise and Fall of Synanon: A California Utopia* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).