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Searching for the Right Structures

Paul Toews

*I*n October 1879 twenty-two delegates representing Mennonite Brethren congregations in Kansas, Nebraska and Minnesota met for three days in Henderson, Nebraska. It was the first official meeting of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches. One year earlier, Peter Regier, elder of the Henderson church, had invited representatives from other congregations to meet on September 28, 1878, to discuss common concerns. Four representatives from Kansas and seven from Nebraska came to this meeting, agreed that the congregations should unite into a conference, and issued the call for the 1879 event.

The Mennonite Brethren Church in 1879 was less than twenty years old, and still struggled with issues of structure and unity. The Document of Secession, signed in January 1860, resulted in the withdrawal of individuals from the existing Mennonite Church in South Russia, but did not create a coherent organization. That would take time to develop. Those who are willing to break the bonds of existing authority frequently find it difficult to submit to, or create, new structures of restraint.

The individuals who drew up the secession document referred to themselves as a “fellowship of believers.” A fellowship was hardly a concept common to the mid-nineteenth-century Russian Mennonite world. It seems to have signaled the desire for a new kind of religious grouping. If the intention was for something less formal and organized, the need to achieve recognition from the Russian government and to regulate internal contradictions encouraged structures for consultation.

Several consultative meetings took place during the years immediately following the secession. The “June Reforms” of 1865, an attempt to reign in the excesses of the early movement and to restore fellowship among people who had excommunicated each other, were the result of extensive consultations. The first meeting of representatives from the congregations in a conference format occurred in 1872.

The focus of this 1872 conference in South Russia was replicated in Henderson in 1879. Both events focused on establishing an itinerant ministerial system that would both nurture the existing congregations and assist in evangelism and church extension. The individuals selected were trusted leaders, and their circulation through the congregations helped insure the preservation of both a common faith and common practice.

The early meetings also addressed the question of conference structure. In the history of western Christianity three essential forms of polity (church government) have been practiced: episcopal, congregational and presbyterian. The episcopal form is based on hierarchy, centralized

*Delegates at the 1912
General Conference on
the steps of the Hillsboro
(Kansas) Mennonite
Brethren Church.
(CMBS Fresno)*

authority and top-down governance. On the other end of the spectrum, the congregational form disavows any real authority outside of the local congregation. Each congregation, under the guidance of the spirit, is autonomous in matters of doctrine and practice. The presbyterian model combines elements of the two. Issues of local concern can be brought to assembled deliberative bodies for discernment and response, but once the representative group make a decision it is binding on the local group.

Mennonite Brethren adopted forms of both the congregational and presbyterian polity. In the selection of local leadership congregations were free to exercise their autonomy. On most other things, certainly in matters of theology and ethics, congregations were expected to adhere to positions reached through the process of conference discussion. Those conference discussions were dominated by the leaders selected by congregations. Thus the polity was congregational only on local issues, and presbyterian on transcendent issues. The positions reached by the conference were to be followed by all member congregations. Deviance resulted in conference-appointed investigatory delegations that would recommend, admonish and if necessary even remove leadership unwilling to follow conference positions.

This essentially presbyterian understanding of how the conference would function was already previewed at the unofficial 1878 event in Henderson. Like subsequent events, it heard concerns brought by member congregations. From one congregation came questions about the appropriate relationships with Baptist groups and the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren, and particularly whether sharing communion with members of either group was acceptable. The consensus was that communion with the Krimmer was acceptable but not so with Baptists. For another congregation the question was the practice of the “sister-kiss,” which was a contentious issue in the old country. The 1878 meeting offered a compromise: the practice was unacceptable between male and female members of the congregation, but was acceptable for the leading minister when welcoming a sister into church membership. For another congregation the question was whether women were to wear a head covering only at church or also at home. The delegates, while divided, agreed to require it in both places. On another question—whether Mennonite

How Then Shall We Live?

Mennonite Brethren have always emphasized the ethical dimensions of the Christian life. This concern was often expressed through resolutions approved by conference delegates. The following are some early resolutions passed at General Conference sessions.

1878: In case a brother is excommunicated according to 1 Cor. 5:11, even the wife should have nothing to do with him. This, however, has no reference to material eating or to marital relations.

1879: The Conference does not permit its members to have weapons in their houses (reaffirmed in 1890 and 1893).

1883: A father, member of the church, cannot give his blessing to his child that withdraws from the church through marriage (outside of the church).

1887: The Conference wishes that our members do not enter holy matrimony before they reach the age of eighteen years.

1887: Our members should stay away from circuses, theaters, and such other places.

1890: Members of the church should refrain from participation and involvement in the contentions of political parties, but are permitted to vote quietly at elections, and may also vote for prohibition.

1893: A minister should choose as simple a vocation (or business) as possible in order not to have his own spiritual life nor that of others harmed on that account.

1893: Our brethren shall not hold the offices of justice of the peace or constable. A member may be a notary public.

1897: It [is] decided unanimously that our members should not carry life insurance policies. [This decision was reaffirmed in 1927 by a vote of 88 to 37].

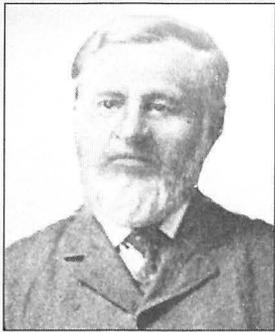
1899: The Conference decided unanimously that church members are not allowed to visit the saloon, attend circus, or sell tobacco.

1900: Jesting and joking by our brethren, whether verbal or in writing, in conversation or in published periodicals, should be avoided.

1905: Churches are not to participate in national celebrations, such as Fourth of July celebrations, but to offer the youth something better, like mission or children's festivities.

1909: Although not forbidden in the Word of God, the Conference is opposed to the practice of marrying near relatives, since it is a violation of the natural laws of life, as well as against the constitutional laws of most states.

Abraham Schellenberg: Itinerant Minister



The role that leading itinerants played in providing leadership for the fledgling conference and in safeguarding unity was significant. Elder Abraham Schellenberg was one of the most notable of these ministers. Born in South Russia, he was

elected to the ministry in 1869 and as an elder in 1875. Between 1869 and his 1879 departure for North America he visited all of the Mennonite Brethren congregations in Russia. After his arrival in central Kansas he was elected as the presiding elder of the Ebenezer Church in Kansas (subsequently the Buhler Mennonite Brethren Church). Between 1880 and 1900 he was for eighteen years the moderator of the conference. Sixteen of those years he worked as an itinerant minister and evangelist. While the record is inconclusive, it appears that he visited every Mennonite Brethren congregation during those years. He was also the first chair of the foreign mission board and a strong advocate of the emerging publication and educational work of the conference.

Brethren could hold political office of any kind—the delegates were unanimous that such positions were not in keeping with their understanding of citizenship.

Part of what made it so easy for the decisions to be binding was the role of the itinerant ministers who circulated throughout the congregations. In addition to assisting with congregational nurture and evangelism, and helping to establish new congregations as people moved to differing locations, they also served an oversight function. Until the development of regional conferences in 1909 a substantial focus of the annual gatherings was the reports by the itinerant and leading ministers of their work during the previous year, the processing of requests from congregations for visits during the coming year and working out on the conference floor the assignments of these itinerant ministers.

Continental and Regional Structures

From 1879 to 1909 the General Conference met annually, always in the central states or Canadian prairies. In 1897 delegates from the Canadian churches first attended, and the 1898 conference meeting in Winkler, Manitoba, was the first held in Canada. The meeting in Canada symbolized a new reality—Mennonite Brethren were an increasingly geographically dispersed group. From the original settlements in Dakota, Minnesota, Nebraska and Kansas, people were now moving in multiple directions. During the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first two of the

(Right) Participants at the 1927 General Conference meeting in the newly-constructed Henderson (Nebr.) Mennonite Brethren Church. (CMBS Fresno)





Participants at the 1930 General Conference at the Hepburn (Sask.) Mennonite Brethren Church. The large tent in the background was used to provide additional meeting space, and was a fixture at the General Conference sessions for many years. (CMBS Fresno)



Delegates from Manitoba prepare to return home after the 1933 General Conference in Hillsboro, Kansas. (Mennonite Historical Society of B.C.)

From Brotherhood to Congregational Autonomy

“The 1951 conference saw the beginning of a slide away from our historic sense of brotherhood and a rising sense of individualism and autonomy. . . . The conference response was to refer the document ‘A Frank Analysis of Our Spiritual Status’ to the local churches for review and reaction. By doing so we lost the full intent of the document. The churches had changed and there was a reaction to the central authority of a special conference committee as suggested in the document. The 1954 conference handed more General Conference authority to the provincial conferences in Canada and the regional conferences in the U.S. where implementation of the directive control of the conference was gradually lost. We on the committee of Reference and Counsel during this time felt that the basic principle of central authority was now gone. This accounts for the fragmentation we find in the Mennonite Brethren Church today, with regional conferences and local churches (and their pastors) being increasingly independent of any larger sense of accountability. . . .

“As I reflect on my years in various levels of conference leadership, I continue to grieve over the relentless move toward greater professionalization of the ministry. I believe it has resulted in the institutionalization of the church. From a covenant people—a brotherhood—we have drifted to become a mere association of independent churches.”

—From JB: *A Twentieth-Century Mennonite Pilgrim*, by J. B. Toews (*Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies-Fresno*, 1995).

twentieth century Mennonite Brethren congregations were established across most of western North America. That fact argued for a different conference structure than the one annual meeting.

The first discussion about the need for regional conferences appeared at the 1902 conference in Oklahoma. At the 1903 conference a committee was appointed to plan for an “expansion of the conference.” The plan presented at the 1904 convention envisioned a southern and northern conference. The next several conferences entertained a variety of proposals for regional sub-units. Some leaders were reticent, for fear that decentralization would also lead to disunity. These fears were addressed by writing a constitution that spelled out the appropriate role for the “Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America” and its sub-units. The General Conference would deal with things of common interest, such as foreign missions, publication, city missions and higher education. The regional conferences were to assume responsibility for home mission work and activities of more local concern.

The 1909 conference, after seven years of discussion, agreed to move to a triennial convention and three district conferences: a Southern District (Kansas, Oklahoma and southern California), a Central District (Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Oregon), and a Northern District (Canada and Rosehill, North Dakota). The Central California congregations were given the option of joining either the Southern or Central District, while Rosehill and the Manitoba congregations were given the option of joining the Central District. Manitoba chose to meet with the Central District for four years before joining the Northern District. In 1912 the California, Oregon and Washington congregations formed the Pacific District Conference. From 1913 to 1954 this pattern of a General Conference and four regional sub-units remained the North American structure.

The Erosion of Conference Authority

The structures created in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seemed adequate until the early 1940s. By that time there was a growing sense that alternative structures were required to meet new realities. The Board of Reference and Counsel (later the Board of Faith and Life) brought to the 1951 sessions one of the most revealing reports and far-reaching recommendations ever considered by the General Conference. The committee, composed of Conference Executive members B. J. Braun, J. B. Toews and H. R. Wiens, Southern District representatives J. W. Vogt and H. H. Flaming, and Canadian representatives B. B. Janz and A. H. Unruh, was as distinguished a cast of Mennonite Brethren leaders as one could imagine for mid-century.

The first section of their report—“A Frank Analysis of our Spiritual Status”—noted the recent “revolutionizing changes” that had come as the consequence of “educational opportunities” and “economic advantages.” Those changes had created a pluralism that threatened established church polity, cherished theological understandings and valued ethical practices. Most distressing was a shift in leadership. Formerly both congregational and denominational leaders emerged from

“within” local congregations and with direction of the “elder.” It was a system that nurtured both “strength and stability.” This leadership was “thoroughly indoctrinated with all Scriptural principles of belief and practice.” The system maintained unity and consistency.

A newer system of selecting church leaders from Bible institutes and seminaries often made new leaders outsiders to their congregations. Hiring an outside person, furthermore, often meant that the congregation moved from several congregationally-trained persons to a single pastor. These “one man pastorates” compromised both the “organizational and instructional principles” of congregations and threatened to engulf the entire conference.

A latter section of the report made clear the organizational problems. Conference polity historically included contradictory currents. The strong tradition of congregational autonomy was hinged to an equally strong sense of “brotherhood,” which implied authority and consensus. It was the latter that was becoming frayed. The denomination had moved from “brotherhood,” where the elders in a “collective relationship offered a strong unified leadership,” to an “associative” ideal, where congregational freedom threatened the unity and coherence of the conference.

Behind the analysis were objective changes. By 1950 most churches in the United States hired paid pastors from beyond their membership. These pastors had received training from various seminaries and Bible institutes across North America. The 1951 report identified conference leaders with training from Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Pentecostal and interdenominational schools. From those places they brought differing conceptions of church and conference.

The report was drafted by the California members of the board—Braun, Toews and Wiens. Their location reflected the leading edge of the social revolution that was taking the Mennonite Brethren beyond their relatively bounded communities of the past. Historically their relationship to larger worlds had been hedged by the protective barrier of village isolation, maintenance of the German language, traditionalism and ethnic seclusion. By the 1940s and 1950s, however, the demise of cultural isolation and the reality of accompanying pluralism was felt everywhere. This was felt most acutely in the United States, where most Mennonite Brethren communities had been established for a longer time than in Canada.

The Board of Reference and Counsel, to meet this new reality and the perceived threats, called for new structures of authority and refurbished carriers of Mennonite Brethren historic identity. They proposed the creation of a Board of Elders to safeguard both polity and doctrine. Their function was to be more authoritative than the Board of Reference and Counsel. The limitation of the Board of Reference and Counsel was that it only “advises and aids” congregations “when serious

“Mennonite Hospitality: 300 Families ‘Put Up’ 3000 Guests”

“Probably in no place on the earth has there been such a demonstration of hospitality, patriotism, and pacifism as is being given in this small western Oklahoma town during the conference of the Mennonite Brethren church of North America.

“Here less than 300 families have taken more than 3,000 visitors into their homes. Figure that out and decide if it can’t be done. Well you haven’t been in Corn. It’s hard to say how the people sleep or where, but every home in Corn and in Bessie and for miles around is entertaining up to a dozen visitors.

“They’re feeding them well on zweibach, schnetka, rye bread, beef, and other delicacies that are dear to the hearts of the Mennonites.

“Corn’s unpaved main street has been churned into a dust storm by the unusually heavy traffic and the Corn cafe and drug store ran out of carbonated drinks by mid-afternoon.

“There are many branches of the Mennonite church. The Mennonite Brethren church of North America is not marked by the long whiskers or unusual attire of some sects. The delegates could be Methodists, Baptists or chamber of commerce delegates. These are a cheerful people, contrasted to the dour visages of other Mennonite sects, and except for the pall thrown over the conference, held every three years, by a war that already is threatening the conscientious scruples of Canadian members, there is a festival spirit abroad.

“In the huge circus tent where the daily sessions are held, the chorus of 3,500 voices swelled Monday afternoon and night as delegates from California, South Dakota, Minnesota, Michigan, Canada and nearly all other parts of the American continent joined in hymns in the language of their forefathers. The Mennonites conduct nearly half of their services in the German tongue.”

—Adapted from articles by Lawrence Thompson in *The Daily Oklahoman*, 23-24 October 1939.

(Top left) Program at the 1960 General Conference in the Reedley (California) Mennonite Brethren Church. This was the conference at which the Mennonite Brethren and Krimmer Mennonite Churches merged into a single conference. (CMBS Fresno)

(Bottom left) Delegates at the 1963 General Conference, held in the Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute Auditorium, Winnipeg, Manitoba. (CMBS Fresno)



questions arise concerning doctrine and church polity.” That was adequate when “our church leadership was still largely a product from within the church; and our congregations were more isolated.” Now more was needed. The proposed Board of Elders would provide “strong unified leadership.” Its rulings would be “considered final,” subject only to the review and change by the conference itself. To further reinforce the consensus and authority of the proposed new structure, four volumes were to be written on Mennonite Brethren polity, doctrine, history and missions.

The proposed Board of Elders, however, was too far-reaching to be accepted at the convention. It was sent to the regional conferences for discussion and there was rejected by all. Of the four proposed volumes only the historical one was written. Abraham H. Unruh’s *Die Geschichte der Mennoniten-Brüdergemeinde, 1860-1954*, was completed, but in a language that limited its role as a carrier of identity for the coming decades. The missions history turned out to be a multi-volume project that was partially completed during the 1970s and 1980s. The volumes on polity and doctrine were never completed.

The rejection of the Board of Elders proposal and the inability to complete the four volumes had consequences. The report of the Board of Reference and Counsel said that the historic balance between a congregational and presbyterian polity had shifted during the decades prior to the 1951 conference. That analysis was surely right. The conference’s reluctance to restore that balance meant that Mennonite Brethren conference polity would become less presbyterian and more congregational. That reality is now apparent at Mennonite Brethren conferences of all levels. One of the more telling comments frequently heard in the corridor of conventions is “let the conference decide what it wishes, we will go back home and do what we think is best.”

National or Continental Structures

The 1954 General Conference convention, meeting in Hillsboro, Kansas, made the most significant structural change following the 1909 decision to move toward regional sub-units. The convention set in motion a process whereby national rather than continental structures would come to dominate Mennonite Brethren organization in North America. The specific issue that drove what J. A. Toews described as the “constitutional crisis of 1954” was the program of higher education. Tabor College had been adopted as a General Conference school in 1934 but continued disproportionately to serve the United States population. The emergence in 1944 of both Mennonite Brethren Bible College (Winnipeg), as a Canadian Conference school, and Pacific Bible Institute (Fresno), as a school of the Pacific District Conference, and the perceived needs of the United States for a seminary raised questions as to the appropriate relationships of these schools to conferences. Various parties from the United States suggested that both Pacific Bible Institute and the proposed seminary should be General Conference schools. Canada brought forward no such proposal regarding the Mennonite Brethren Bible College. Furthermore, the Canadian delegation declined to vote on the question of the appropriate conference linkages of Tabor, Pacific Bible Institute and the seminary. That declension was in fact a statement that higher education would be a matter for the two nations to decide. Canada had in place a national conference to deal with their school. Their withdrawal of support from Tabor College as a General



The newly-elected General Conference Executive officers converse outside the delegate hall at the 1969 General Conference in Vancouver, B.C. Left to right: Chairman John A. Toews, Vice-Chairman Marvin Hein, and Secretary H.H. Voth. (CMBS Fresno)



Behind the scenes at every General Conference were local volunteers, who helped the events run smoothly. Shown here is the kitchen staff at the 1966 General Conference in Corn, Oklahoma.

(CMBS Fresno)

(Right) Missionary presentations were a significant part of most General Conference programs. Here, a group of missionaries in native costume pose for a group portrait at the 1966 General Conference in Corn, Oklahoma.

(CMBS Fresno)

Conference school and the unwillingness to decide the fate of institutions south of the border necessitated the creation of a United States national conference.

In 1954 education was the specific issue that focused larger unspoken realities. The Canadian Conference, by then larger than the three United States district conferences combined, received a membership allotment on conference boards and committees as though it were simply another regional unit. Furthermore, the Canadian Conference (formerly the Northern Conference) was already functioning as a national conference with subsidiary provincial conferences.

The Canadian Conference had evolved into an identifiable national conference for multiple reasons. All of the offices and institutions (Tabor College, mission headquarters, Board of Trustees office, Publishing House) of the General Conference were south of the US-Canadian border. The United States constituency had a sense of ownership and investment in them that the Canadians did not share. Those institutions and agencies all began before the major influx of Mennonite Brethren into Canada and their leadership remained predominantly American. Canadian leaders often felt their voices and concerns were not adequately heard. Partly from the differing needs than those in the south and partly from a sense of exclusion, parallel institutions had emerged—the school in Winnipeg, the *Afrika Missions-Verein*, the production of separate hymnals, the creation of Christian Press in Winnipeg. These were responses to the perceived or real americanization of the General Conference.

The large influx of Mennonite Brethren into Canada during the 1920s and 1940s meant that they were largely preoccupied with issues of resettlement, initial adaptation





(Above) Delegates at the 1999 General Conference in Wichita, Kansas.

(CMBS Fresno)

and finding a footing in the new society. Preservation of inherited patterns, common to new immigrant generations, was stronger in Canada than in the United States. The rapid acculturation that occurred during the 1940s and 1950s in the United States produced a North American Mennonite Brethren population with two differing cultural orientations. Continentalism could easily become frayed as national differences increasingly shaped the two populations.

Continental or Global Structures

The mid-twentieth-century discussion of appropriate conference structures was not limited to redefining relationships between Canada and the United States. In 1948 the South American churches became a fifth district entity within the General Conference and ever since then Mennonite Brethren have held visions of a global Mennonite Brethren Conference. The 1960s witnessed a more sustained discussion about the possibilities of a global structure. The Board of Reference and Counsel brought to the 1960 centennial convention a proposal to change the conference name from “The General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America” to “The General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches.” The recommendation no doubt reflected the delight and even satisfaction from having several representatives from churches around the world attending the centennial celebrations. In this heady atmosphere it was easy to think that the continental boundaries were limiting. Other voices cautioned that the move from “church” to “churches” opened the door to less uniformity. The 1963 conference sanctioned the name change following assurances from the Board that change would permit bringing other

national conferences into affiliation without in any way lessening the historic “voluntary interdependence” on all matters “of common spiritual heritage and mission.”

The 1966 conference, with the new name in place, considered a detailed proposal for a World Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches. The proposal called for a structure that looked very much like the more ecumenical Mennonite World Conference. While calling for this new international body, the proposal simultaneously recognized that the United States and Canadian conferences would continue to have a special relationship and work together in ways analogous to the past. The proposal in essence wished to preserve what was and simultaneously open the door to new possibilities. The proposal met an ironic fate. It was sent out to each national Mennonite Brethren conference, all of whom responded favorably. Simultaneously, the South American churches withdrew their membership in the North American conference in favor of a stronger South American Conference between the churches of Brazil and Paraguay. Just as North America dreamed of global partnerships, South America opted for continental partnerships.

Global, Continental, National or Local

If the North Americans after 1960 dreamed of globalism, the reality is that localism has become more dominant. Following the failed 1966 plan for a global Mennonite Brethren structure, the most comprehensive discussion of conference structures occurred in 1986 and 1987. An early draft of the “General Conference Visions/Goals” statement occupied the central place in an October 1986 meeting of the Board of Reference and Counsel. The draft could not have been more prescient: “There will be increased fragmentation and autonomy due to growing individualism, localism, nationalism, regionalism and theological pluralism.” The report further predicted growing fragmentation between Canada and the United States, between the Midwest and West Coast regions and “re-alignments . . . by 2000.” The 1999 General Conference convention decision to disband itself would seem to be a prophetic fulfillment.

The trend toward growing fragmentation and autonomy is echoed in other denominations. Modern Western culture drives those social realities with speed and persistence. Conscious effort is required to retain historic bonds or replace them with new ones that have sufficient strength to have consequences. Those larger cultural forces are even more evident in a denomination with a long history of mixing congregational and presbyterian polities. The degree of conference attachment has greatly varied among Mennonite Brethren congregations. Some have found the attachment very important, others less so. Some congregations seek to uphold conference positions, others feel no such obligations. Some congregations meet requests for financial support, others do not. Some congregations are persuaded that local units of the church of Jesus Christ need a close association with other like-minded churches, others do not.

If the Mennonite Brethren wish to reclaim the promise of their strong heritage and make a collective witness to the modern world then a renewed commitment to the structures of collective decision making will be required. Finding the appropriate structural forms for working together—regionally, nationally and globally—becomes an imperative. The early developments of the International Conference of Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB) seem to offer that hope. ICOMB, however, remains more of an idea and a forum for leaders to discuss issues than a working conference. The future will determine whether it becomes a functioning conference entity able to speak with a single voice.

In the cacophony of modern noise, Christians speaking with one voice are more apt to be heard than those speaking in multiple voices. In a culture growing ever more post-Christian the work of the Christian community requires ever more cooperation and unity.