Embodying the Vision: Higher Education.

Author(s): Paul Toews & Abe Dueck.


Published by: Kindred Productions (2002)

Stable URL: [http://hdl.handle.net/11418/1306](http://hdl.handle.net/11418/1306)

FPUScholarWorks is an online repository for creative and scholarly works and other resources created by members of the Fresno Pacific University community. FPUScholarWorks makes these resources freely available on the web and assures their preservation for the future.
It is hard to exaggerate the Mennonite Brethren commitment to education. The decision in 1857 by some members of the Mennonite church in the village of Gnadenfeld, South Russia, to establish a private Christian school was one of the early acts in the drama that led to the formation of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Teachers, furthermore, were disproportionately represented among those who joined the early Mennonite Brethren Church.

Discussion regarding schools was one of the recurring topics of Mennonite Brethren conferences at virtually all levels. The 1881 sessions of the General Conference already raised the need for private education. The minutes, in a statement echoed by many subsequent conventions, noted that “the brothers had such different ideas and the possibility of a Church-school caused tremendous pressure.” The solution was to ask each church to select someone who would investigate the requirements for establishing local private schools. Many communities and local leaders took the 1881 conference advice seriously and began local schools. By 1902 there were at least seven Mennonite Brethren schools in Kansas, Nebraska, and Oklahoma. Some were elementary, some also included preparatory programs. A favorite means for establishing these schools was the creation of a *Schulverein* (school society).

In the early 1880s some Mennonite Brethren in Kansas fashioned such a society whose aspirations were more than just another local school. They hoped to establish a school for training denominational young people to serve as teachers both in the elementary schools and in mission settings. In 1884 the General Conference offered its commendation for the work. To achieve their goal the society sent Peter Wedel to the Baptist seminary in Rochester, New York, with hopes that he would return and develop a school. Wedel did return, but the conference then asked the society for his services as a Conference evangelist and reimbursed the society five hundred dollars for his education. John F. Harms, editor of the *Zionsbote*, was dismayed at the turn of events. He asked Wedel, “Why have you done this to us?” Wedel responded: “What can you expect? . . . You send me to a seminary and make a preacher out of me—small wonder that I am no longer a teacher.”

With or without Wedel, there was growing momentum in Kansas for a higher educational institution. In 1896 several Mennonite Brethren individuals responded to overtures from McPherson College, a liberal arts school operated by the Church of the Brethren in McPherson, Kansas, to establish a “German Department” there. The purpose of the rather misnamed department was to provide a context in which German-speaking Mennonite students could...
April 30, 1918, dawned beautiful, quiet and unsuspecting. It was an ideal spring morning on the Kansas plains. In the serenity of that quiet morning stood Tabor College, “tried and true,” as the college song says, in the small village of Hillsboro. At 7:00 in the morning, the cry of “Fire! Fire!” awakened the villagers. Everyone nearby rushed to the scene of the spectacular fire. By 7:20 the roof of the Tabor College building had collapsed and by 8:00 there were only smoldering ruins. Everything was lost: the building, the library, records, equipment, the museum. Students, faculty and townspeople stood speechless and overcome by grief. But a word soon filtered through the crowd: “Tabor College still lives!” Who had the courage to proclaim that is still unknown. The oral tradition attributes the phrase to Henry W. Lohrenz, the founding president of the college. But it was more than a phrase. At 10:00 in the morning the students, faculty and friends of the college gathered for a meeting in the Hillsboro Mennonite Brethren Church. They sought to understand what had happened. The college, though only ten years old, had prospered. Now it was gone. They did what Mennonite Brethren have frequently done in the face of danger and despair. They turned to God in prayer. After a two-hour prayer meeting, they committed themselves to the rebuilding of Tabor College and pledged $10,000 toward reconstruction. Their prayers were answered, and soon a new and more glorious structure was built. Tabor College did indeed still live.
Reflections on Education in Canada

“In 1939 . . . I entered the Coaldale Bible School at age sixteen. Here I spent three wonderful years under the tutelage of men such as Jacob H. Quiring, John A. Toews, and Bernhard W. Sawatzky.

“Sawatzky took a personal interest in me and helped me to regain some self-confidence. Since humility was seen as the epitome of piety in those days . . . we had been duly knocked down in our youth. Some of us needed to be delivered from despising ourselves . . .

“Higher education was generally suspect when I grew up. It was often equated with ‘the wisdom of the world’ of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians. However, I rejected that attitude and earned a B.A. at . . . the University of British Columbia. On one occasion when my father-in-law saw some of my textbooks he could only exclaim: ‘Gefährlich, gefährlich!’ (‘Dangerous, dangerous!’).”

—Adapted from David Ewert’s “Theological Autobiography” in Bridging Troubled Waters: The Mennonite Brethren at Mid-Twentieth Century (Kindred Productions, 1995).

receive training both for church ministries and for teaching in their parochial schools.

The Kansas initiative for an advanced school soon came under the purview of the General Conference and achieved a quasi-denominational status. In 1898 McPherson College offered the Conference “full control of the German department.” The conference was at first unwilling to accept the responsibility, but in 1899 it encouraged all congregations to help pay the salary of John F. Duerksen, the newly-designated Mennonite Brethren teacher and leader of the department.

Each General Conference session between 1899 and 1904 heard reports from the German Department, encouraged its financial support and simultaneously refused to adopt the program. They repeatedly noted the need for “our own school,” but continued to favor its development through a society rather than its own action.

The opening of Tabor College in Hillsboro, Kansas, in the fall of 1908 fulfilled that goal. It was the result of a society, largely based in Kansas. Society chairman J. K. Hiebert, together with Henry W. Lohrenz and Peter C. Hiebert, both young graduates of the McPherson program, led the initiative. While the leaders wanted General Conference sponsorship they knew that was unattainable and so asked for its “good will and . . . recognition.”
The reluctance to accept Tabor as a General Conference school was rooted in various factors. The far-flung geographical dispersal of the Mennonite Brethren by the early twentieth century made establishment of a central school more difficult. The 1909 decision by the General Conference to meet triennially instead of annually, and to establish district conferences that met annually was an acknowledgment that some tasks were better carried out in smaller regional units than on a continent-wide basis.

The move toward district conferences also reflected that Mennonites in different parts of the continent were on differing acculturation paths. Those differences would become more pronounced with time. Furthermore, as clusters of congregations grew and a critical mass of Mennonite Brethren emerged in differing regions, they felt the need for their own local school. The second meeting of the Northern District (later the Canadian Conference) in 1911 appointed a committee to explore the establishment of its own school. The Pacific District Conference, at its inaugural meetings in 1912, pledged its commitment to Tabor College. By 1916, however, the Pacific District was also discussing the creation of its own school.

The hesitancy for the General Conference to commit to Tabor College was not only geographical. Tabor also reflected a particular form of education—one that was to be a training ground for ministers, but also combined training in the classics with religious studies. A striking symbol of this expansive quality was the building Tabor erected in 1920, with its classical Greek facade. By 1920 Tabor graduates were attending the finest universities in the country. More sought training in divinity at Yale University than at any other place. That intellectual progressivism was a source of unease to some Mennonite Brethren constituents.
Why a Bible College?

"The Mennonite Brethren Bible College is being founded in response to a long felt [sic] want. Official expression of this need was given by Rev. Joh. A. Toews' report to our Canadian Conference in July 1939 in Coaldale, Alberta. This report stressed the acute problems of obtaining properly qualified teachers for our numerous Bible Schools. Advanced theological training and a broad general education will be required of our Bible School teachers, if these Schools are to survive and to progress. Wherever spiritual young men are adequately prepared and show teaching ability, our local Churches should help them to attend higher Bible Colleges and Seminaries. But there exists the danger of choosing the wrong College, and some have returned to us with ideals and interpretations foreign to our Mennonite Brethren conceptions and doctrines in the light of the Scripture. 'Watch and pray lest Satan would succeed in undermining the foundation of faith in which our Church and our Bible Schools are based.'"

—From the first catalog of Mennonite Brethren Bible College (1944).

Even so, the General Conference conventions from 1909 to 1933 invariably included reports from committees recommending financial support for Tabor. Some conference sessions included strong endorsements of Tabor by significant leaders, but the school remained under the control of the Schulverein rather than the General Conference.

Development of Bible schools in Canada

While the United States was casting its lot with the liberal arts college, Mennonite Brethren in Canada were moving in a different direction. For them, the preferred educational institution was the Bible school.

By the early twentieth century, there were already several Mennonite educational institutions on the prairies: Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna, Manitoba (1889); Rosthern Junior College in Saskatchewan (1905); and Mennonite Educational Institute in Altona, Manitoba (1905). None of these were sponsored by the Mennonite Brethren Church, although its members were among the teachers as well as students. These institutions were essentially high schools, although they also functioned to some degree as teacher-training institutions and to provide instruction in Bible and the Mennonite faith.

The first Mennonite Brethren Bible school in Canada opened at Herbert, Saskatchewan, in 1913. Herbert Bible School began as a school of the Northern District under the leadership of John F. Harms, although from 1916 to 1921 it operated as a local society school. In 1921 William J. Bestvater began a new initiative for the school, once again sponsored by the Mennonite Brethren Conference.
The Canadian prairies became fertile soil for the establishment of dozens of Bible schools, and at least nineteen were established by Mennonite Brethren between 1925 and 1947. Two others were founded in Ontario. Many of these schools survived only a few years, whereas others prospered for a time but encountered difficulties that forced them to close by the 1960s. The three schools that survived into the final decades of the twentieth century were Winkler Bible School in Manitoba, Bethany Bible School in Hepburn, Saskatchewan, and Columbia Bible College in Abbotsford, British Columbia. Winkler Bible School was the first school established by the
Russländer in 1925, but encountered difficulties both because of competition from other Bible schools and because the Mennonite Brethren Bible College was also located in Manitoba. It closed in 1997.

Bethany Bible School, founded in 1927, was able to survive despite some difficult years and in 1965 became a joint institution of the Alberta and Saskatchewan Mennonite Brethren Conferences. In 1995 the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference of Saskatchewan became another sponsoring body.

Columbia Bible College developed after a series of closures and mergers of local Bible schools, including the Mennonite Brethren Bible Institute of British Columbia. In 1970 the Mennonite Brethren Bible Institute merged with Bethel Bible Institute of the United Mennonites of British Columbia to form Columbia Bible Institute, later renamed Columbia Bible College. It has experienced the most remarkable growth of all the Mennonite Brethren schools in Canada and draws from Mennonites and others in the lower Fraser Valley and beyond.

Still another educational institution began as a by-product of Mennonite Brethren mission work in Quebec beginning in the 1960s. In 1976 Institute Biblique Laval was begun by the Canadian Conference to train leaders for the Quebec churches. Today it is known as École de Théologie Évangélique de Montréal.

**Tabor becomes a General Conference school**

The 1933 General Conference sessions, coming at the depths of the Great Depression, heard reports regarding various Mennonite Brethren schools. Given Tabor's unique role as a quasi-denominational school, its economic plight dominated the educational discussions. The 1930 convention had revisited the question of ownership and declined because of a lack "of general agreement in the conference to accept and assume the school," but did agree to a $10,000 annual contribution for the next three years. More was needed, however, if Tabor was to remain open.
Establishment of new liberal arts institutions

Tabor’s status, however, was soon challenged by new educational developments. In 1944 two new institutions of higher learning came into existence: Mennonite Brethren Bible College (MBBC) in Winnipeg and Pacific Bible Institute (PBI) in Fresno. Both of these new schools, in contrast to the liberal arts quality of Tabor, began more like “higher Bible schools,” concerned with the reinforcement of biblical understanding and training for churchly vocations. With time both moved toward Bible college status and offered a religious baccalaureate degree. Eventually both further transformed themselves into liberal arts institutions.

The first formal calls for a Canadian national school had come in 1939, but war and other factors delayed implementation of this vision until the creation of Mennonite Brethren Bible College in 1944. The college was intended to prepare young people for missions and church ministries at home. In this respect its purpose overlapped with that of Tabor College, which many Canadians had attended in the earlier years and continued attending for some years. But various issues, including the fact that Canadians had not yet made the transition to the English language, led Mennonite Brethren in Canada to create their own school. Even though it was a Bible college, it offered several courses that were more akin to a liberal arts curriculum.

The Pacific District Conference began serious discussions about establishing its own school in 1916, but did not achieve that goal until 1944. The delay can be attributed to various causes—the trauma of being Germanic through two world wars, the economics of the Great Depression, and the need to absorb countless migrants from the Midwest. But the more serious reasons for the delay were theological. The period from the 1920s to the 1940s was a time of uncertainty for West Coast Mennonite Brethren. Some were drawn to the Bible Institute of Los Angeles with its vigorous fundamentalism. Others found a new freedom and expressiveness in the Pentecostal-Holiness movement, which contrasted with their more restrained forms of religious expression. Wartime concern for passing on distinctive values bridged some of these differing theological emphases, however, and the school opened in 1944 with solid district support and a traditional American Bible institute curriculum.

A unified approach to education

Between 1944 and 1954 there were repeated discussions about a unified or coordinated approach to higher education. For the most part the discussions involved representatives from the General Conference Education Committee, which governed Tabor, and representatives of the three schools. Little coordination was achieved, however, as each school had keen supporters. The prospect for a unified program further dimmed as the two new schools found their footing and growing regional support.

The 1954 General Conference was a watershed moment for shaping Mennonite Brethren higher education. The issues were multiple: Could one General Conference school adequately serve such a geographically dispersed constituency? What would be the relationship between Tabor, PBI and MBBC? Should the church support a liberal arts education or a more Bible-centered education? Was a Mennonite Brethren seminary needed or not?
Answers to these questions divided largely along national lines. The United States was past the transition from German to English and many of its young men were attending various denominational seminaries. The language transition helped to introduce the professional pastorate. Canadian churches, with the more recent immigrant infusions of the 1920s and 1940s, largely retained the German language into the 1960s. Retention of the German language and the continuation of the multiple lay ministry were linked.

Representatives from the two United States schools and district conferences called for Pacific Bible Institute to become a General Conference school under a unified Educational Board. The Canadians were opposed and came with no similar recommendation regarding Mennonite Brethren Bible College. The consequence was that in 1954 Tabor College and Pacific Bible Institute came under the governance of a United States Conference Board of Education. Tabor retained its liberal arts orientation and in the early 1960s gained full accreditation. Pacific Bible Institute added a junior college curriculum, renamed itself Pacific College and in the mid-1960s became a fully-accredited liberal arts baccalaureate-level institution. Beginning in the 1970s it added numerous Masters degree programs, and eventually became known as Fresno Pacific University.

Mennonite Brethren Bible College in time also broadened its purpose and added more liberal arts courses to its curriculum. An agreement with Waterloo Lutheran University (now Wilfrid Laurier University) allowed transfer of credit into a general liberal arts degree program. By 1970 an arrangement with the University of Winnipeg allowed students to enroll concurrently in a university program while attending MBBC.

By the 1970s, however, MBBC found it increasingly difficult to attract students from across Canada, particularly British Columbia. Columbia Bible Institute became a viable alternative as it matured into a baccalaureate-level college. By the late 1980s it was clear that MBBC was no longer viable as a Canadian Conference school, and in 1992 it became Concord College, spon-
sored by the Manitoba Conference. Eventually it became one of the founding colleges of the Canadian Mennonite University, an inter-Mennonite university in Winnipeg.

Establishing a General Conference seminary

The first General Conference discussion of the need for a seminary came at the 1948 convention, when the Educational Committee recommended that the conference consider making the Tabor Bible School a seminary. Behind that recommendation was not only the need for pastors with greater training but also the recognition that receiving such training at other seminaries carried risks to denominational unity. The Seminary Commission, established at the 1948 conference, reported in 1951 that “present church workers” had received their training at sixteen different seminaries. The list included Lutheran, Baptist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian and interdenominational schools.

The professionalizing of the ministry had proceeded faster in the United States than in Canada. It was to this need that the United States Board of Education responded when it decided to establish a seminary without Canadian participation. By combining members of the Tabor College and Pacific Bible Institute faculties, the school opened in Fresno in the fall of 1955.

Virtually every General Conference convention from 1954 to 1975 reviewed the development of the seminary and raised the question of it becoming a binational institution. Several study com-
Reshaping the Seminary

“In the spring of 1955 the Board of Education approached me to accept the presidency of the new seminary. I declined for several reasons: First, the seminary program was considered only provisional, subject to ongoing negotiations toward a joint sponsorship by the U.S. and Canadian conferences. Second, the Fresno location for the seminary was also considered provisional; the permanent location was to be selected by the two conferences when agreement was reached with Canada. Third, the faculty already appointed from the Bible departments of Tabor College and Pacific Bible Institute did not project an Anabaptist character for the seminary. It was to be known as an evangelical seminary, and all publicity identified it as such. With the rising religious pluralism and individualism of the 1950s I could not see myself leading a program that did not project a distinct Anabaptist identity.”

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

missions investigated a unified seminary program. Throughout these years the United States was ready for such a joint program, but the Canadians questioned whether it would best serve their interests.

Canadian reluctance to join the Americans was based on several factors. Because most had arrived in North America about fifty years after the Americans, they found it difficult to place their own stamp on already-established institutions. Although their numbers soon almost equaled the Americans, they were under-represented on most boards. Cultural and linguistic differences also remained. Canadians held firmly to the German language until beyond mid-century, and their institutions were the main instruments to retain the language. In more general terms they also often felt that the Americans did not adequately understand their needs.

As late as 1968 the General Conference Board of Reference and Counsel suggested that both national conferences consider establishing a joint seminary in the Vancouver area. The United States Conference responded favorably, but the Canadians rejected the proposal. Yet six years later, at the 1975 convention, the seminary came under the ownership of the General Conference.

Several developments during the 1960s and early 1970s made this possible. When the seminary opened in 1955, it did so under the theological shadow of American fundamentalism. While that movement was attractive to some Mennonite Brethren in the United States, it was less so to Canadian Mennonite Brethren. J. B. Toews, upon assuming the presidency of the seminary in 1964, broke with these fundamentalist moorings and reoriented the school toward Anabaptism. In the coming years a new faculty not only theologically re-centered the seminary but made it central to the denomination’s recovery of its Anabaptist heritage. During the 1970s and 1980s the school played an important role in several General Conference boards, particularly the Board of Reference and Counsel, the Board of Christian Literature and the Historical Commission.

Developments in Canada in the early 1970s argued for joining with the Americans in a seminary program. The Mennonite Brethren Bible College, which had been central in training leaders for thirty-five years, was facing a crisis caused by low enrollment, loss of confidence within the constituency and increasing strength of provincial schools. In 1971 the conference discontinued the B.D. program that MBBC had offered for several years. That same year the conference appointed a commission to study the future of post-graduate theological education and to examine various alternatives.

The theological reorientation of the seminary plus the fact that most of the new faculty were Canadians surely made the school more acceptable to the Canadian conference. The language shift in Canada and the accompanying professionalization of the ministry also called for education beyond what the Bible institutes and the Bible college in Winnipeg could provide. So in 1975 the Seminary became the second officially-sponsored school of the General Conference.

Conclusion

The General Conference’s official sponsorship of Tabor lasted twenty years. The Conference’s decision to disband in 2002 means that its sponsorship of the seminary will be twenty-seven years. These realities reflect the larger pattern of uncertainty in the educational focus, governance and
ownership of Mennonite Brethren higher educational institutions. The story of Fresno Pacific University is the most graphic illustration. In its short history since 1944 it has undergone more fundamental shifts than many schools with longer histories: from a Bible institute, to a junior college, to a senior college, to a university with undergraduate and graduate programs; from ownership by the Pacific District Conference to ownership by the United States Conference and then back to the Pacific District in 1979; from training students primarily for churchly vocations to educating them primarily for vocations in the world; and from a college designed to foster distinctive Mennonite Brethren identity to one that is religiously ecumenical. This story is repeated in varying degrees with virtually all of the Mennonite Brethren schools of higher learning.

These transitions reflect growth and maturation. They also reflect differing impulses in the history of the Mennonite Brethren. The impulse to build these schools was rooted in the need to insure that Mennonite Brethren young people would receive appropriate denominational understandings. Denominational schools are typically nurseries of denominational identity. They shelter students from the impact of alien ways. But the question of what is to be mediated to the next generation sometimes becomes unclear. Should schools be established to train people for churchly vocations or should they see their mission to train people for many diverse vocations? Should schools offer some liberal arts courses within an essentially religious studies program or should they offer religious studies courses within an essentially liberal arts program? Denominational schools need denominational support and governance. But the best structure for that support has been unclear. Is leadership preparation for the Mennonite Brethren best done in a denominational setting or in an ecumenical setting? Is it best provided by local societies, districts or provinces, the national conferences, or the unified General Conference?

These uncertainties notwithstanding, the story of the Mennonite Brethren commitment to higher education is astonishing. Seldom have so few people developed so many institutions of
learning. Seldom have institutions with so few resources accomplished so much. Their capacity to do so in the future largely rests with the church. Christopher Jenks and David Riesman, American commentators on distinctive institutions, noted some years ago that the survival of distinctive institutions of learning depends on "the survival within the larger society of . . . enclaves whose members believe passionately in a way of life radically different from that of the majority, and who are both willing and able to pay for a brand of higher education that embodies their vision." Mennonite Brethren schools, with their concern for passing on the strengths of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, have believed passionately in a different way of life. Their ability to survive with that distinctive voice will be possible only so long as the denomination wishes to retain those distinctive elements.