



FRESNO PACIFIC  
UNIVERSITY

FPUScholarWorks

---

**Mennonite Brethren Theology: a Multiple Inheritance.**

Author(s): Jost, Lynn.

Source: Toews, Paul & Kevin Enns-Rempel, eds. *For Everything a Season: Mennonite Brethren in North America, 1874-2002, An Informal History*, pp. 42-53.

Published by: Kindred Productions (2002)

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/1307>

---

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.



# 4

## Mennonite Brethren Theology: A Multiple Inheritance

Lynn Jost

The Mennonite Brethren Church is an evangelical-Anabaptist renewal movement, a missionary church with emphasis on personal conversion within a community of disciples. It claims a Bible-centered approach historically focused on theology, ethics and ecclesiology. A simple hermeneutic—“What does the Bible say?”—has often been invoked as a denominational strength. While this no doubt is true, it has also opened the church to various—and sometimes conflicting—theological emphases. Multiple theological currents have been present since the creation of the Mennonite Brethren Church in 1860. This multiple inheritance has enriched the church, but it has also been the source of some weakness. The tendency toward fragmentation and pluralism have frequently surfaced in the history of the church.

The three primary religious currents that have shaped Mennonite Brethren are Anabaptism, pietism, and evangelicalism. Each of these are complex movements in themselves, but their main characteristics help us to understand how Mennonite Brethren have come to be who they are today.

### Anabaptism

The Mennonites of South Russia were largely the biological and spiritual descendants of the Dutch Mennonites of the sixteenth century led by Menno Simons. Menno, rooted in the Brethren of the Common Life and Catholic piety (in contrast to the Swiss Anabaptist roots in the Zwinglian reformation), emphasized personal conversion and the nature of the church. In succeeding centuries, as Mennonites migrated to Prussia and then to southern Russia, they experienced many changes. The original vitality of faith and practice subsided. Mennonites had been attracted to Russia by the availability of large tracts of land where they could develop closed settlements and control their own schools and other institutions as well as receive exemption from military service. But their isolation led to religious formalism and a loss of their missionary vision.

The Mennonite Brethren document of secession strongly asserts that the early brethren sought to restore the Mennonite Church of Russia to its New Testament ideal. That document decried the decadent condition of the Mennonite church. It explicitly declared that the new movement was “in full agreement with Menno Simons.” Using frequent biblical references and citing Menno again and again, the document outlined specific concerns: the ordinances of the church (baptism, the Lord's Supper, and foot washing) were to be practiced within a pure church of converted disciples living a holy lifestyle; church leaders were to live circumspectly in light of their calling; and church discipline (the ban) was to be practiced by the church. Personal conversion and a life of discipleship were to characterize church members. These concerns were

*Participants at the Mennonite Brethren ministers' course held at Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg, 1957. These courses were important forums for shaping Mennonite Brethren theological understandings.*

*(CMBS Fresno)*

rooted in their understanding of the New Testament and the nature of sixteenth-century Anabaptism.

In addition to the focus on conversion, the Mennonite Brethren followed Menno in emphasizing church discipline to enforce personal piety and a literal biblical hermeneutic. The Anabaptist emphasis on ethical commitment to discipleship within a covenant community of peacemakers was central to early Mennonite Brethren practical theology.

### Lutheran Pietism

Peter M. Friesen, the prominent historian of the Russian Mennonites, identified two reformers who contributed to the founding of the Mennonite Brethren church. Menno, he claimed, was the builder of the spiritual house, and Eduard Wuest, a Lutheran pietist, refurbished an impoverished structure. Wuest came to the Russian Mennonite colonies in the 1850s, preaching the need for personal conversion, an experience of repentance from sins, and a joyous assurance of salvation. His pietist preaching led to many conversions. The renewal provided a spark that challenged the more formal and traditional religious practices of the mother church. With pietism came a renewed emphasis on personal conversion, devotional piety, Bible reading, prayer, free religious expression and emotional release.

The pietistic revival did not come about in a vacuum. In the decades prior to Wuest's arrival in Russia, Mennonites in several centers experienced intellectual and spiritual renewal. In Ohrloff, teacher Tobias Voth organized prayer meetings, mission meetings and a Christian Literature Society. At Gnadenfeld, *Bibelstunden* (Bible study discussion hours) and prayer meetings in small group home fellowships contributed to the renewal of members, many of whom later became Mennonite Brethren leaders. The Russian Mennonite colonies were ripe for a renewal movement.

### Baptists and Evangelicals

A third religious current that influenced the early Mennonite Brethren Church was mediated through German Baptists. The early Mennonite Brethren movement was not well defined and often chaotic in nature. Theological understandings and ecclesiastical practices were still very fluid. Mennonite Brethren became very vulnerable to the excesses of some of their leaders. The dead formalism that some experienced in their mother church gave way to uncontrolled extremism. The young Mennonite Brethren church experienced a movement known as the *Froeliche Richtung* (joyous movement) between 1862 and 1865, with excessive emotional expression and indiscriminate exercise of the ban against respected church leaders.

In order to bring some order and stability to the movement, Abraham Unger, an elder in the Einlage village church, invited Johann Gerhard Oncken, the founder of the German Baptists, to southern Russia. He and another Baptist leader, August Liebig, introduced Baptist congregational polity to the Mennonite Brethren. Unger even published a Confession of Faith, which was essentially the German Baptist Confession with some distinctive Mennonite beliefs added. This German Baptist influence positively contributed to peaceful resolution of some early governance

## “Biblical or Systematic Theology?”

*The 1957 General Conference authorized the publication of three books: one on Mennonite Brethren history, one on Mennonite Brethren polity and one on Mennonite Brethren theology. J. B. Toews was asked to write the one on theology. In 1995 he reflected on the task and why the book was never written. His position confirms comments by various Mennonite Brethren leaders over many years that ours has been a “biblical” theology rather than a “systematic” theology.*

“I was asked to prepare a book on ‘Mennonite Brethren Theology (Biblical Doctrine).’ I worked on it, as my schedule allowed, for the next several years and prepared a tentative outline. I read all the writing of Mennonite Brethren in the *Friedensstimme* in Russia, the *Zionsbote* in North America and other papers by Mennonite Brethren to gain insights into the various trends in our history. My conclusion, after all this research, was that Mennonite Brethren had an implicit biblical theology: they believed in the Bible and found the answers for faith and life as needs demanded.”

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

issues. It also resulted in continuing cooperation between the two groups. The first Mennonite Brethren foreign missionaries went to India under joint sponsorship with the Baptists, and many Russian church leaders received theological training from the Baptist seminary in Hamburg.

The Baptist influence however, also threatened the Anabaptist/Mennonite identity of the young church. Other Mennonites often labeled Mennonite Brethren as Baptists. Government officials threatened to withdraw their special privileges as Mennonites and to place them under the same restrictions as other groups who were defined as sects. Indeed, the Baptist influence encouraged some Mennonite Brethren to question Mennonite understandings of biblical nonresistance and the Baptist emphasis on individual conversion tended to reduce the emphasis on discipleship.

In later years the Russian Mennonites, especially Mennonite Brethren, were also influenced by the Plymouth Brethren movement, which had its institutional center in Blankenburg, Germany. Mennonite leaders frequently attended the prophetic conferences at Blankenburg, which had a heavy emphasis on eschatology and dispensational theology. Plymouth Brethren speakers were also invited to gatherings in various churches and estates in southern Russia.

## A Theological Autobiography

“One often-debated question was the security of the believer. ‘Eternal security’ was considered a heresy. We knew nothing about Calvinism or Arminianism, but we knew that the warnings of Scripture had to be taken seriously. This often led to a lack of assurance and robbed us of much joy and peace.

“Sanctification was very central in the church’s teaching, and at times it was understood as perfectionism. Since none of us measured up, we often felt like giving up. It was clearly stated that we were saved by grace, but the strong emphasis on holy living and good deeds caused us to wonder whether we would be able to stand in the final judgment or whether, like the five foolish maidens, we would find the door shut.

“Conversion was generally understood as a crisis experience, and those who had come into the kingdom in a more gentle way, not kicking and screaming, would have to do a lot of explaining . . . when it came to baptism. . . .

“One theological issue that earned me personally much criticism was my failure to uphold the dispensational approach to the Bible. Some thought I had become a modernist because I no longer held to a pretribulation rapture. In fact I was Anabaptist in this regard. I took the Sermon on the Mount seriously, which Scofield had relegated to the coming millennium. I didn’t have to speculate on who or what the treasure in the field or the pearl of great price was, because I interpreted all the parables of Jesus as Kingdom parables. The most bitter attacks came when it was discovered that I put little stock in political developments in modern Israel, which is largely godless; and when I pointed out that the line in the New Testament is no longer drawn between Jew and Gentile, but between people of faith and unfaith.”

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

## Balancing the Theological Triangle

The three major currents that have shaped Mennonite Brethren have each helped to enrich the movement. Anabaptism formed the ecclesiastical foundation for Mennonite Brethren. Mennonite Brethren considered Anabaptism to be a biblical movement, especially because of Menno’s emphasis on new birth, holy living and the church as a community of disciples. Pietism offered the promise of engaging the heart. Traditional forms of worship were replaced by joyous personal experiences of redeeming grace. Pietism reinforced Menno’s emphasis on personal conversion, whereas its weak ecclesiology was counterbalanced by the strong emphasis on the nature of the church by Anabaptists. Baptists offered both a practical theology (congregational polity and foreign mission organization) and a systematic theology (a ready-made confession of faith and the theological curriculum of the Hamburg seminary).

The literal biblical hermeneutic of the early Mennonite Brethren worked well enough in solving most ethical issues. The Bible had clear enough answers for most questions. As years went by, however, the Anabaptist hermeneutic became less familiar to Mennonite Brethren Bible teachers and preachers, and was replaced by an evangelical systematic theology.

## Early Trends and Influences in North America

When Mennonite Brethren began moving to North America in the 1870s they did not diverge significantly from

their roots. The first official convention of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren in North America met in 1879 for inspirational Bible teaching and to plan cooperative mission work. Home missions involved sending evangelists and elders to strengthen existing churches and to plant new congregations. Foreign mission work began as a cooperative venture with the American



Baptists in India. Elder Abraham Schellenberg served as conference moderator and provided a leading voice in favor of cooperation between churches in the work of missions, education, and publications. Evangelists, including Peter H. Wedel, N. N. Hiebert, and John F. Harms, were appointed to visit the scattered congregations.

The Anabaptist concern for ethical faithfulness is evident in the issues that were discussed. The church was committed to a separation from the world, as evidenced by high standards of Christian life and discipleship. Issues debated included insurance policies, political involvement, marriage to non-church members, and leadership questions.

Several factors promoted theological unity among Mennonite Brethren. Their common culture and language often isolated them from their neighbors. Their simple biblicism helped them to resolve issues of faith and life. No systematic grid for reading the Bible was needed because of their shared culture. Furthermore, although Mennonite Brethren followed a democratic congregational rule, a few leading elders largely controlled denominational life. The later division of the conference into district conferences (1909) limited the centralizing control of the elders and opened the way to growing diversity.

The need for biblical training for Mennonite Brethren leaders and missionaries soon became evident in North America. Pastors and missionaries turned to two primary sources—Baptist

*Bible teacher conferences in Canada were instrumental in focusing the theology set forth in Mennonite Brethren Bible schools. This group of teachers met in Saskatoon in 1941. (CMBS Winnipeg)*

seminaries and the Bible school movement. Many of the early missionaries and college Bible instructors were trained at Rochester Seminary in New York and at Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. These schools helped nurture a missionary vision and biblical emphasis and contributed practical instruction in evangelism, Christian education and theology. On the other hand, the hierarchical concept of church ministry and polity became accepted as the pattern at home and abroad. An emphasis on Anabaptist theology was neglected. The New Testament concept of multiple church leaders and calling out leaders from within the congregation was replaced by a polity governed by professional clergy.

Bible institutes, particularly the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, and Northwestern Bible Institute and Seminary in Minneapolis, had a profound influence on the spiritual development of a generation of leaders. Their emphasis on Bible content, missionary motivation, a simple hermeneutic, the experiential reality of Christ as Savior, and the work of the Holy Spirit as a second act of grace became sustaining influences in spiritual life. Evangelism, however, tended to emphasize the benefits of salvation while neglecting the notions of service, accountability and discipleship.

Exposure to the Bible institute movement also opened Mennonite Brethren to the fundamentalist influence. Mennonite Brethren trained in the Bible institutes emerged with a concern for propositional truth in the battle against modernism, which focused on biblical inerrancy, the virgin birth, the physical resurrection of Jesus, and the imminent return of Christ. A dispensational eschatology was taught in most of these institutions.

Fundamentalism made its impact on Mennonite Brethren in a variety of ways, particularly by means of radio and the print media. Periodicals such as John Rice's *The Sword of the Lord* and Gerald Winrod's *Defender* became household literature among Mennonite Brethren. Fundamentalist textbooks, notably R. A. Torrey's *What the Bible Teaches* and James M. Gray's *Synthetic Bible Studies*, served as doctrinal guides for Mennonite Brethren pastors, teachers and educational curricula. Fundamentalist and pietist writings provided devotional material for Mennonite Brethren homes.

One of the leaders whose influence was widespread in the Mennonite Brethren Church in the 1920s and 1930s was William Bestvater. Bestvater emphasized missionary outreach, biblical study, and personal conversion. His influence spread widely through his teaching at Herbert (Sask.) Bible School and Tabor College, his writing in textbooks and periodicals, and his itinerant evangelism. Bestvater was a powerful speaker and his advocacy of dispensational theology influenced the Mennonite Brethren church for half a century or more.

### Developments in Russia Until the 1920s

While Mennonite Brethren were becoming established in North America, the Russian Mennonite Brethren Church was also developing. Gradually the relationships between Mennonite Brethren and the Mennonite Church (referred to as *Kirchliche*) improved and there was cooperation in an organization known as the General Conference of Mennonite Churches in Russia. Mennonite Brethren were among the leaders in education, land settlement, health care, publications, and church life.



*Anna and William Bestvater. He was well-known for his lectures on dispensational theology.*  
(CMBS Fresno)

## Abraham H. Unruh

Abraham H. Unruh (1878-1961) was an outstanding Mennonite Brethren minister, teacher, and Bible expositor in Russia and Canada. In 1920 he was asked to join the newly-founded Bible school in Tschongrav, Crimea. Unruh taught there until 1924 when the Soviet authorities closed it. He immigrated to Canada in 1925 and began a Bible school in Winkler, Manitoba with his former colleagues.

In 1944 the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conference established the Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg and Unruh became the first president (1944-1945). He taught there until his retirement in 1956 and remained very active in Conference boards and as an eloquent preacher in the Canadian constituency.

According to his biographer, David Ewert, "anyone who met Unruh for the first time was struck by his physique. He was quite literally head and shoulders above other men. His physical dimensions, coupled with a dignified bearing, gave him a patriarchal appearance. . . .

"[Unruh] was physically not too well coordinated. Those responsibilities in the home which demanded some degree of physical dexterity were conveniently left to his wife. She . . . could handle a snowshovel as well as any man. The neighbors . . . recount with delight the drama which the Unruhs staged when they put up storm windows in fall. . . . Mrs. Unruh was up on the ladder removing screens, cleaning windows, and putting on the storm windows, while the doctor of divinity stood on the ground watching. Abraham was content to hold the ladder while dear Tina took care of the rest. But they got along famously. . . .

"[He] was careful in the observance of the Lord's day, but not in a pharisaical way. Once when a brother did some necessary work on Sunday and excused himself by a reference to the words of Jesus about the donkey that fell into the well on the Sabbath, Unruh commented: 'Good enough!' 'But,' he added, 'if the donkey falls in every Sunday, perhaps you should sell the donkey.'"

—Adapted in part from *Stalwart for the Truth: The Life and Legacy of A. H. Unruh*, by David Ewert (Board of Christian Literature, 1975)



(CMBS Winnipeg)



*Jacob W. Reimer was an influential teacher and Bible expositor among Mennonite Brethren in Russia, the United States and Canada. (CMBS Fresno)*

Annual Bible conferences often attracted members of both groups and a new *Allianz* group emerged (calling itself the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren), which sought to bridge the differences between them. Mennonite Brethren continued to be deeply influenced by the Blankenburg Alliance Conference established in 1885. The emphases were on the inner spiritual life, sanctification, fellowship and dispensational eschatology. Jacob W. Reimer, an influential Mennonite Brethren itinerant minister, regularly attended the Conference and was influential in bringing Alliance teaching to the church. The writings of Blankenburg people were a major theological resource of Mennonite Brethren ministers.

These factors shaped Russian Mennonite Brethren immigrants who arrived in North America during the 1920s. Positively, the pietistic influence brought new warmth and deepened a commitment to Biblical faithfulness. But the pietistic emphases on personal salvation, the inward experience of God's grace, the fellowship of all true believers, and millennial eschatology, pushed to the periphery the concept of discipleship within a committed community of believers. The emotional emphasis within the salvation experience had a negative result for some. Furthermore, Mennonite Brethren commitment to nonresistance was often seriously eroded.

Despite these influences the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith, first adopted in Russia in 1902, continued to reflect Anabaptist beliefs. The confession is filled with biblical language and references. The emphasis lies on the church, Christ, and the Christian life. Articles deal with such Anabaptist issues as baptism, the Lord's Supper, foot washing, oaths, and nonresistance. Although Mennonite Brethren were influenced by pietism and incipient evangelicalism, the confession demonstrates a continued commitment to Anabaptism.

### **Developments in North America Until Mid-Century**

The influence of fundamentalism and dispensationalism was stronger in the United States Mennonite Brethren Church than in Canada. The chief reason for this was the wave of Russian immigrants to Canada between 1924 and 1930. Theologically the experiences of the earlier and later groups of immigrants were in many respects parallel. Both groups had cooperated with Baptists, and both had been influenced by a dispensationalist theology that had undermined some Anabaptist values. But the first generation of 1920s immigrants in Canada were probably protected to a greater degree from some of the distinctive features of North American fundamentalism. They came to Canada speaking German, so the transition to English in Canada was generally delayed by about two decades and insulated the Canadian Mennonite Brethren from much of the fundamentalist influence that was so significant south of the border. They were struggling to establish themselves economically and had closer relationships with other Mennonites from Russia with whom they shared the suffering and trauma of the Russian Revolution and Civil War. Nevertheless many leading ministers, itinerant evangelists, and instructors at the Bible

institutes that were established in the first decades after the new wave of immigration taught a dispensationalist eschatology.

Other leaders and institutions embarked on a different course. Abraham H. Unruh was among the leaders who emerged after the 1920s migration. He preached widely and taught at Winkler Bible School and later at Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg. Unruh was highly regarded as a Bible expositor. On one occasion, after attending a lecture in which Bestvater used a large canvas chart to expound the plan of dispensational eschatology, Unruh approached the speaker and asked in Low German, “Brother Bestvater, do you think that God will be guided by your rag?”



*Abraham E. Janzen as a young professor at Tabor College.*  
*(CMBS Fresno)*

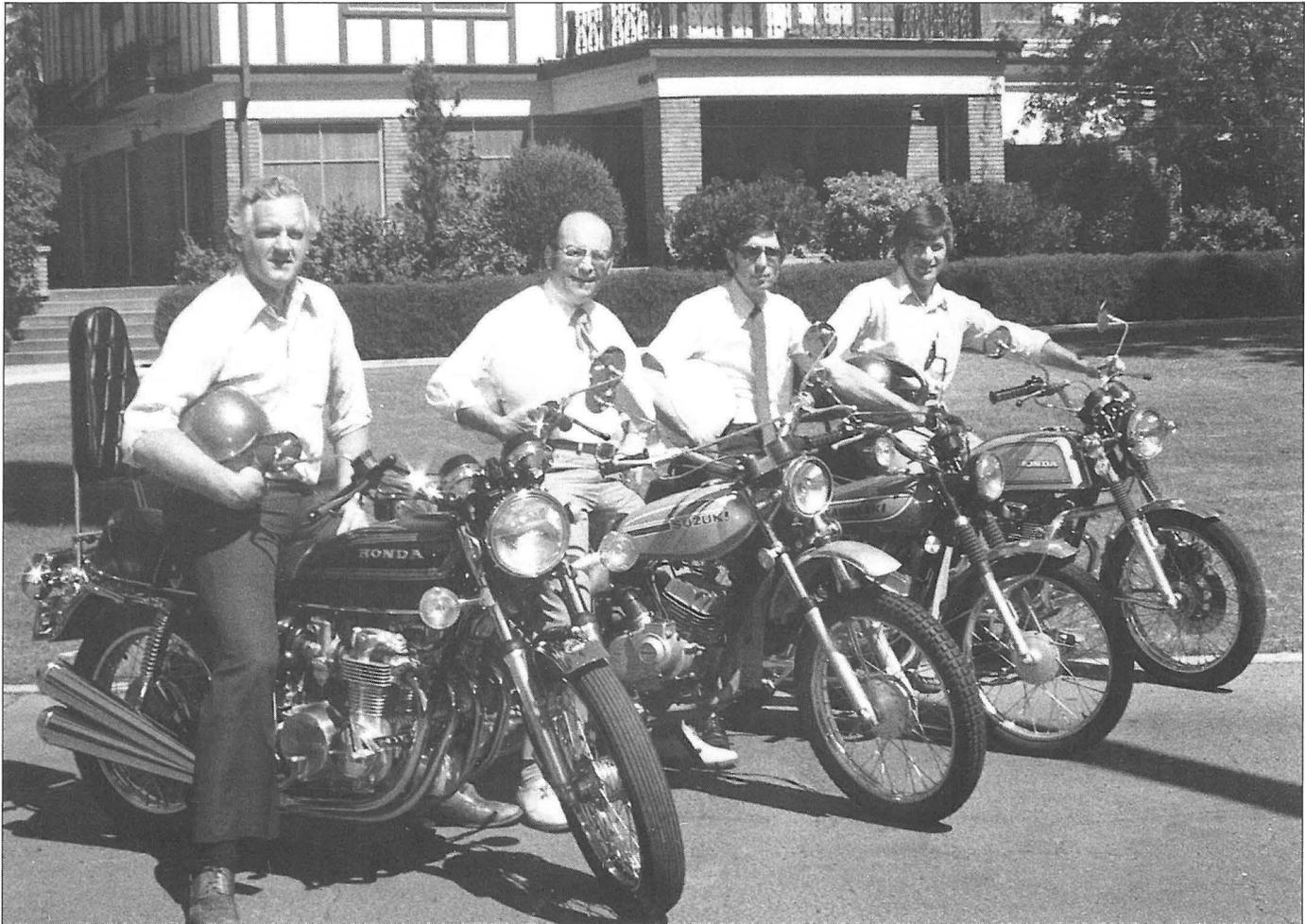
### **Reshaping Mennonite Brethren Identity**

Several factors in the 1940s and 1950s precipitated a shift to an intentional Anabaptist Mennonite Brethren identity. The world was forced Mennonite Brethren to grapple with the issue of military service. Though a staunch dispensationalist, A. E. Janzen of Tabor College became a strong advocate of nonresistance and alternative service. General Conference sessions were devoted to articulating the Mennonite Brethren peace position both within and beyond the church. During World War II, many Mennonite Brethren served in the Civilian Public Service system in the United States or in the Alternative Service program in Canada. In these

camp Mennonite Brethren met other Mennonites and often found that they too were committed followers of Christ. The fellowship and the instruction they received often strengthened their interest in Anabaptist ties.

In 1943 Harold S. Bender delivered his well-known address entitled “The Anabaptist Vision.” This laid the groundwork for a recovery of the Anabaptist heritage throughout Mennonite circles. At Tabor College as well as at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg, the impact of new Anabaptist scholarship was felt very strongly. A change in leadership at Tabor reflected this shift. Presidents Peter E. Schellenberg and Frank C. Peters both supported Anabaptism and the conference peace position, as well as participation in relief efforts. The denominational periodicals and other publications began to feature more and more material in support of Anabaptist positions. Finally, Mennonite Brethren participation with Mennonite Central Committee led to a greater awareness of how Anabaptist values could shape the church and its mission.

In Canada the foremost institution that shaped the theological identity of Mennonite Brethren from the mid-1940s until the 1970s was the Mennonite Brethren Bible College. John A. Toews, who taught at the college for over twenty years and who was president for six years, had a strong commitment to evangelical Anabaptism. Similarly Frank C. Peters, and later Henry Krahn,



*They're not a new generation of itinerant ministers, but rather members of the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary faculty in 1981. The seminary played an important role in reshaping Mennonite Brethren theology in an Anabaptist context. (l-r): Henry Schmidt, Elmer Martens, John E. Toews, Howard Loewen.*  
(CMBS Fresno)

sought to reinforce the Anabaptist identity of the school. New Testament professor David Ewert led in the move toward a more critical biblical hermeneutic that had strong bases in new evangelical schools such as Wheaton College and Fuller Theological Seminary. Aside from Mennonite Brethren Bible College there were others like John H. Redekop and Wally Unger who promoted a Mennonite Brethren identity that was both evangelical and Anabaptist.

The Board of Christian Literature and the Historical Commission of the Mennonite Brethren Conference played a major role in the reawakening of the Anabaptist identity of the Mennonite Brethren Church, beginning with the publication of *The Church in Mission* (1967), edited by A. J. Klassen. Another major milestone was the publication of *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers* (1975), by John A. Toews.

Perhaps the most important event to set theological direction for the Mennonite Brethren church in the last quarter of the twentieth century was the founding of the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno in 1955. In 1975 this seminary was adopted as a joint seminary for the United States and Canada. During J. B. Toews' presidency during the 1960s the faculty shifted its instruction to emphasize Anabaptist theology. Professors D. Edmond Hiebert, David Ewert, John E. Toews, and Tim Geddert in New Testament; Elmer Martens and Allen Guenther in Old Testament; J. B. Toews, A. J. Klassen, and Howard Loewen in theology; and Hans Kasdorf, Henry Schmidt, and Waldo Hiebert in church and mission served the conference as leaders, Bible conference speakers, and instructors of a generation of pastors, teachers, and missionaries.

On the whole, Canadian Mennonite Brethren tended to favor Anabaptism more highly than their American counterparts. Various studies between 1972 and 1989 have consistently indicated

that Canadian Mennonite Brethren scored higher in their commitment to Anabaptist values. Gradually, however, many of these values have shown signs of erosion on both sides of the border.



John A. Toews (CMBS Winnipeg)

During the last quarter century the denomination has struggled to define and articulate its theological identity. Evangelical influences have continued to make themselves felt. The impact of educational institutions, alliances with the National Association of Evangelicals, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and their associated mission associations, an openness to the Church Growth Movement with its emphasis on practical means to build churches, and in cooperative evangelistic ventures. The tension and attempts to balance between the evangelical and Anabaptist emphases is evident in the topics featured in the study conferences convened by the General Conference Board of Reference and Counsel and later by the Board of Faith and Life. Topics have included the biblical concept of the church and leadership (the topic of not less than twelve different conferences), the Holy Spirit and the charismatic movement, sanctified and separated living, divorce and remarriage, church and state, discipleship, evangelism and social action, eschatology, women in ministry, peacemaking, hermeneutics and inerrancy.

### Sin With A Small “s”?

“It was always a problem to know how much of this new culture to accept and how much to reject. The church across the river determined some of the boundaries for those of us living in Blaine Lake [Saskatchewan]. But where the categories were unclear or without precedent, we knew we could establish a case with Mother and engage in the activity without guilt. We never went to movies in the Palace Theatre, but we could go to school movies, shown after school on Fridays for five cents. These were travelogs and early films like *Les Miserables* and similar classics. The teacher selected these movies, and the teacher was always right. So we handed over our hot five-cent pieces and slipped into the full classroom to sit two to a seat to watch black and white films jerk across the screen. The projector frequently broke down.

“We attended the chautauquas set up in a large tent on the ballpark to watch the films there, often cowboy-and-Indian films and ‘educational’ lectures. We rushed to the Palace Theatre to watch Little Theatre and minstrel and amateur shows. The guiding principle seemed to be that we could attend any place that didn’t have soft seats without committing small ‘s’ sin. But one year I did.

“The teacher was taking a choir to the city to sing in the music festival, an all-day affair. The choir would sing, eat in a restaurant—a real one—then in the afternoon attend the matinee performance of Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald at the Starlight Theatre. But we had to get permission from our parents. That was a Mount Everest undertaking.

“Mother didn’t know what to say. We reasoned. It was a good show, no dirty parts. Everyone else was going. The teacher would be with us. Finally, banking on the word of the teacher, we received Mother’s permission.

“We sang in the music festival and went flat, terribly flat, in the big auditorium. We heard the judge with an English accent pronounce another chorus as ‘bettah’ but not because it was from the town of ‘Biggah.’ Our teacher probably felt worse than we did. Then off to a restaurant—all thirty of us innocents.

“Next came the movie. I crept in with fear in my heart. This was a real theater with wonderfully soft seats and a ceiling that sparkled with stars. Would the world end? Was I saved? Was I committing a sin, and if so what kind? Big ‘S’? Little ‘s’? Had I been wrong to beg Mother so hard to let us go?

“But the fragile beauty of Jeanette MacDonald and the handsomeness of Nelson Eddy made me forget my fears. I watched spellbound as they sang, riding into the sunset. I liked this kind of sin.”

—From *The Storekeeper’s Daughter: A Memoir*, by Katie Funk Wiebe (Herald Press, 1997).

The church today continues to search and seek to own the best elements of its diverse heritage in shaping its theological identity. Mennonite Brethren pietistic roots have sought nurture in charismatic influences through the years, including a strong interest in the Vineyard Movement and the contemporary music currently associated with British and Australian evangelical charismatics. While some Mennonite Brethren find the music compelling, others lament the loss of theological diversity and richness in the music of classical and contemporary hymnody. The Mennonite Brethren evangelical stream continues to seek nurture in the evangelistic success stories of mega-churches with their seeker-sensitive services. As a result, preaching has tended to shift from exegetical to topical, with an emphasis on relevance that may eclipse a concern for costly discipleship in faithfulness to the Jesus of the Gospels. Although the Confession of Faith adopted in 1999 reaffirms Mennonite Brethren commitment to church membership and covenant accountability in the discipling community, congregations allow pastors to practice the signs of baptism and the Lord's Supper without heeding official polity that links these ordinances to the church.

The three-legged stool of Pietism, evangelicalism and Anabaptism served the Mennonite Brethren General Conference throughout its existence. Often the strengths of Pietism and evangelicalism reinforced the Anabaptist core of Mennonite Brethren theology. At other times, the emphasis on private, personal conversion and piety overshadowed the call to discipleship within a covenant community. The last act of the Mennonite Brethren General Conference under the leadership of the Board of Faith and Life offers hope for a united future. The acceptance of the Confession of Faith, which was the result of a decade-long discernment process within the church, continues the legacy of an evangelical-Anabaptist, Bible-centered, missionary movement.