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THE FELLOWSHIP OF EVANGELICAL BIBLE CHURCHES AND THE QUEST FOR RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

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On July 16, 1987, at its ninety-third annual convention, the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Conference changed its name for the third time in its brief history. Founded in 1889 as the Conference of United Mennonite Brethren of North America, the conference had by 1918 become the Defenseless Mennonite Brethren in Christ of North America, and in 1937 changed its name to the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Conference. Despite this proclivity for name changes, the 1987 decision was significantly different from the previous alterations. The new name, Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches (FEBC), is conspicuous in its omission of the word "Mennonite." For the first time, the conference formally abandoned a public identification with its Mennonite heritage.

This attitude was by no means a new phenomenon for the conference. Since the 1950s the FEBC has found itself increasingly out of step with certain aspects of Mennonitism and as a result felt compelled to define its religious self-understanding in other ways. Although remaining at least nominally identified with the Mennonite faith, the FEBC sought to qualify that identification by drawing upon other religious movements, particularly a conservative form of American Evangelicalism, for a significant part of its self-understanding. So widespread had become their discomfort with things Mennonite that sociologist Calvin Redekop dubbed it "The Embarrassment of a Religious Tradition."¹

The FEBC, however, was not always embarrassed by its Mennonite origins. For much of its history the FEBC understood itself as clearly within the Mennonite tradition. Indeed, a large part of its story has been that of a small Mennonite conference attempting to forge links with other members of the Mennonite family. For one reason or another, however, these links failed to hold. As a result, the FEBC felt compelled to look beyond its own tradition for other sources of religious fellowship and identity, and found them primarily within the American Evangelical tradition. The influence of Evangelicalism, with its emphasis on personal salvation and individualized ethics, caused many in the conference to question Anabaptist-Mennonite distinctives

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¹ Calvin Redekop, "The Embarrassment of a Religious Tradition," *Mennonite Life*, XXXVI (Sept. 1981), 17-21.

such as nonresistance and the concept of "community of believers."² Other members have criticized Mennonitism for the "ethnic" aspects of the tradition and turned to a supposedly "culturally neutral" Evangelicalism as a means of transcending the problem. Unable to reconcile the tensions between Evangelicalism and Mennonitism, the FEBC has largely abandoned its Mennonite heritage and become primarily Evangelical in its identity.

The group which eventually came to be known as the Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches arose out of two separate Mennonite renewal movements during the 1870s and 1880s, one in Jefferson County, Nebraska, and the other in Mountain Lake, Minnesota. In both instances a portion of the Mennonite community which was religiously and culturally more conservative than its neighbors broke away from established churches to form new congregations. Led by Isaac Peters in Nebraska and Aaron Wall in Minnesota, these new churches emphasized personal regeneration and a separated lifestyle, characteristics which they found lacking in their fellow Mennonites.³ Though developments in the two regions evidently took place independently, Wall and Peters soon became aware of each other and decided to affiliate. On October 14, 1889, representatives from the Ebenezer churches of Henderson and Jansen and the Mountain Lake Bruderthaler Church met in Mountain Lake to organize themselves as the "Conference of United Mennonite Brethren of North America."

This new conference perceived itself as a return to the essence of the Mennonite faith, not a deviation from it. Among the basic beliefs affirmed at the first conference were baptism on profession of faith, nonresistance in word and deed, and the centrality of Jesus Christ as stated in I Corinthians 3:11,⁴ all of which seemed to place this group firmly within the context of Mennonite faith and practice. Early conference leadership, particularly that of Isaac Peters, was deeply rooted in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. The Russian Mennonite historian P. M. Friesen referred to Peters as "one of our most knowledgeable, if not the most knowledgeable student of Anabaptist literature."⁵ Since Peters emerged as the strongest leader of the early United Mennonites, his attitude toward the Mennonite tradition must have influenced the conference as a whole.

However, there were signs that the new conference felt ambivalent toward its Anabaptist-Mennonite roots. Early conference leaders, while still in Russia, were evidently touched by the same German Pietism which influenced

2 Calvin Redekop, "Anabaptism and the Ethnic Ghost," *MQR*, LVIII (1984), 133-38

3 Theodore Schmidt, "The Mennonites of Nebraska" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1933), 29; Ferdinand P. Schultz, *A History of the Settlement of German Mennonites from Russia at Mountain Lake, Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1938), 79-80.

4 O. J. Wall, ed., *A Concise Record of Our Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Annual Conference Reports 1889-1979* (Freeman, S. Dak.: Pine Hill Press, [1980?]), 5.

5 P. M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)* (Fresno, Calif.: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978), 72.

the origin of the Mennonite Brethren Conference in 1860. The preaching of Lutheran evangelist Eduard Wuest had a profound impact on both Isaac Peters and Aaron Wall, the latter having been converted in 1846 at one of Wuest's meetings in Gnadenfeld.⁶ This background undoubtedly influenced the pietistic critique which the first United Mennonites leveled at their Mennonite neighbors. Their stress on individualized conversion owed more to the pietism of those such as Wuest than it did to Mennonitism with its emphasis on "peoplehood" and a "community of faith."

The attitude of some conference members toward the traditional Mennonite catechism sheds light on this tension. Some early United Mennonite congregations, notably Mountain Lake, abandoned the catechism in favor of "a genuine heart-searching conversion."⁷ These churches rejected the concept that mere participation in a catechism class qualifies people for church membership regardless of their personal commitment to Christ. But by completely rejecting catechisms rather than merely the abuse of them, they abandoned one of the most effective means of instilling a sense of Mennonite peoplehood. By accepting members simply on the profession of a personal faith, the United Mennonites moved toward a more "Evangelical" than Anabaptist model of conversion, one that stressed the vertical relationship between the individual and God and neglected the horizontal relationship between the believer and the community. Had these early churches woven together the idea of genuine conversion with a distinctive Mennonite catechism, perhaps the EMB Conference would not have strayed so far from its religious heritage in later years.

The small Conference of United Mennonites was acutely aware of the need to align itself with larger groups of like-minded Christians and during these early years sought such linkages exclusively with other Mennonite churches. Despite its Pietist/Evangelical leanings the United Mennonites of the late nineteenth century were unquestionably Mennonite in their self-perception. But which Mennonites to align with? There was a significant population of General Conference Mennonites in the central plains states during this time, but they were immediately eliminated from consideration due to their "liberalism" and "worldliness." The churches from which the United Mennonites originally split had for the most part joined the General Conference,⁸ reason enough for them to avoid interaction with that group. The United Mennonites initially found fellowship instead with the Mennonite Church, or "Old Mennonites," the largest body of Mennonites in North America.

⁶ Wall, 4.

⁷ Henry F. Epp, "Sketches of the History and Development of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Conference," *Gospel Tidings*, XXXVII (Aug. 1, 1948), 5.

⁸ Schmidt, 28; J. John Friesen, "Early Mt. Lake Churches," *Mennonite Life*, VIII (July 1956), 137.

The first significant contact between these two groups probably occurred in 1875, long before the United Mennonite Conference even existed. In that year, when Isaac Peters traveled to Philadelphia and New York to meet incoming Russian Mennonites, he visited the Mennonites in the East. Peters was favorably impressed by these non-Russian Mennonites, stating that "although they differ from us, it seems that they have held onto our Mennonite heritage and beliefs."⁹ He developed an ongoing relationship with members of the (Old) Mennonite Church and became an occasional contributor to the Mennonite Church-related periodical *Herald of Truth* over the next few decades.¹⁰

After 1889 several Mennonite Church leaders in turn showed interest in the EMB, particularly John F. Funk, editor of the *Herald of Truth* and patron of immigrant Russian Mennonites. He attended annual United Mennonite conferences as early as 1892 and served as secretary at the 1896 meeting.¹¹ Reports of EMB meetings frequently appeared in the pages of his *Herald of Truth*.¹² Funk was not alone in his interest in the new Mennonite group. Other prominent Mennonite Church leaders who attended early United Mennonite conferences included Daniel Graber (1897), M. S. Steiner (1905 and 1906), Noah Mack (1902 and 1908) and Daniel Kauffman (1906).¹³ So favorable were relations between the two groups that when the Mennonite General Conference was organized in 1898 the United Mennonites joined as the "Nebraska-Minnesota Conference." Thus, while maintaining its identity as a distinct regional conference made up of eight congregations, the United Mennonites became a part of the largest body of Mennonites in North America.

However, the ties between the Nebraska-Minnesota Conference and the rest of the Mennonite Church were never very close, largely because of language differences and other cultural dissimilarities. By the 1890s the Mennonite Church had switched almost exclusively to the English language, while the United Mennonites still spoke primarily German, a barrier which undoubtedly made fellowship difficult. And the Dutch/Prussian/Russian heritage of the United Mennonites had little in common with the Swiss/South German Mennonite Church tradition. Still other differences stood in the way. In his *Mennonite Cyclopedic Dictionary* Daniel Kauffman stated that "as the con-

9 Isaac Peters, "Ein Brief von Aeltesten Isaak Peters, Sutton, Nebr., an den Aeltesten Leonhard Sudermann, Berdjansk, Russland. Sutton, Nebr. den 13. Sept. 1875," *Mennonitische Rundschau*, XLVII (Apr. 2, 1924), 3-4.

10 See, for example, "An Account of the Cause and Purpose That Led to the Emigration of the Mennonites from Russia to America," XLIV (Nov. 7 and 21, 1907), 417-18, 437-38; and "Christian Baptism with Water, in Its Evangelical Application and Form," XLIII (May 24 and 31, 1906), 182-83, 192-93.

11 Wall, 8.

12 John F. Funk, "A Trip to Minnesota," *Herald of Truth*, XXIX (Dec. 15, 1892), 373.

13 Wall, 8-11.

servative leaders [of the United Mennonites] grew older, there was a general trend toward more liberal standards,"¹⁴ which contributed to the distance between the two churches. Kauffman did not elaborate on what these "liberal standards" were, but, for whatever reasons, by about 1918 the Nebraska-Minnesota Conference dropped its affiliation with the Mennonite General Conference and became once more a small (fifteen congregations in 1918) independent body of Mennonites.

While still a member group in the Mennonite General Conference the United Mennonites began mission work in Chicago, providing them with a new opportunity for interaction in the wider Mennonite fellowship. In 1906, when the first United Mennonite workers arrived in Chicago, the Mennonite Church had already been in the city for thirteen years. During the following decade the Defenseless Mennonites (now Evangelical Mennonite Church), the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren and the General Conference Mennonites as well began mission work in Chicago.¹⁵ Given this large number of Mennonite programs in one city, it seems that various groups would have found it advantageous to work together in a united, or at least complementary, mission effort. However, this evidently did not take place. Rather than working together, each church chose to run its own small mission in isolation from other Mennonite projects, and the Mennonites in Chicago remained essentially strangers to one another.¹⁶ While the United Mennonites (who had by now changed their name to Defenseless Mennonite Brethren) were certainly not solely to blame for this general indifference of all Chicago Mennonites, the experience did little to propel the conference toward greater interaction with other Mennonite groups.

During the first few decades of the twentieth century a large array of "outside" religious influences began to imprint themselves upon the Defenseless Mennonite Brethren (DMB) consciousness. Nondenominational Bible study conferences, traveling evangelists and Bible schools all introduced new dimensions to DMB thought.¹⁷ The desire to accept religious innovations was undoubtedly augmented by the general demand for "Americanization" and "Anglo-Conformity," which reached a peak during World War I.¹⁸ Given these external enticements and pressures, it is hardly surprising that a small and somewhat insecure ethnoreligious group such as the DMB would have begun to accept gradually the theology and religious practices of the surrounding society. These "new" ideas, with their emphasis on individual salvation

14 *Mennonite Cyclopedia Dictionary*, 1937 ed., s.v. "Nebraska-Minnesota Conference."

15 Leo Driedger, J. Winfield Fretz and Donovan E. Smucker, "A Tale of Two Strategies: Mennonites in Chicago and Winnipeg," *MQR*, LII (1978), 297.

16 *Ibid.*, 299.

17 Redekop, "Embarrassment," 18-19.

18 Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 98-100.

and personalized ethics, broadened the gap between the DMB and their Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.

Perhaps no DMB leader was more influential in this development than the evangelist George P. Schultz, undoubtedly the most significant figure in the history of the conference. A graduate of Moody Bible Institute, he took from his alma mater a heavy dose of personal piety and individualized morality, which he in turn imparted "with sledge-hammer force"¹⁹ for almost half a century in cross-continental evangelistic tours of Mennonite communities and in his home church, the Brighton Mennonite Chapel of Chicago.²⁰ Schultz's preaching did not generally emphasize the typically Mennonite focus on *Nachfolge* (discipleship) but rather underscored the benefits accrued by those who choose the Christian life, and the need for a one-on-one relationship between the individual and God.²¹ J. Winfield Fretz, later a prominent Mennonite sociologist, visited Schultz's church in Chicago in 1940 and observed, "On the whole, one does not get the impression that there is anything characteristically Mennonite about this church or its leaders."²²

At the same time that the DMB began looking outward for theological moorings, it continued the search for inter-Mennonite linkages. During the 1920s discussions were undertaken with the similarly-named Defenseless Mennonite Church (now Evangelical Mennonite Church of Fort Wayne, Indiana). Ironically, a prime mover in the discussions with the Defenseless Mennonites was George P. Schultz. In 1921 the English-language DMB periodical, *Good Tidings* (founded in 1919 and edited by Schultz), merged with the Defenseless Mennonite periodical, *Zion's Call*, taking the name *Zion's Tidings*. Spurred on by this action, merger negotiations began on the larger, conference level. Yet in spite of apparent theological compatibility this alignment never came to be. The reason appears once again to have been language differences. The Defenseless Mennonites were primarily an English-speaking conference, while the DMB (with the exception of the mission churches in Chicago) still spoke German almost exclusively. Many members of both conferences felt that such a cultural barrier would hinder a positive relationship, and the idea of a merger was dropped. In 1929 Schultz resigned his editorship of *Zion's Tidings*, which then became an exclusively Defenseless Mennonite paper.²³

19 "Correspondence: Henderson, Nebraska, Aug. 27, 1940," *Mennonite Weekly Review*, XVIII (Sept. 4, 1940), 3.

20 For a vivid description of Schultz's preaching style and doctrinal emphases in Chicago, see J. Winfield Fretz, "A Study of Mennonite Religious Institutions in Chicago" (B.D. thesis, Chicago Theological Seminary, 1940), 91-93.

21 See, for example, George P. Schultz, *Short Talks on Live Themes* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1924), 39, 41, 60.

22 Fretz, 93.

23 Henry F. Epp, "Glimpses of the History of Our Conference Paper," *Gospel Tidings*, XXXVII (Aug. 1, 1948), 8.

If language barriers stood in the way of a merger with the Defenseless Mennonites, then disagreement over the proper mode of baptism hindered DMB relations with both the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren and the Mennonite Brethren Conferences. Actually, the three conferences shared much common ground and would seemingly have made logical partners. All understood themselves as Mennonite reform movements, each born at least in part as a response to perceived moral laxity and spiritual lifelessness around them. They placed considerable emphasis on personal regeneration and evangelism and expended much effort in foreign missions. Despite this compatibility the issue of mode of baptism prevented the development of mutually beneficial relations between the DMB and the other two groups.

Both the Mennonite Brethren and the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren practiced baptism by immersion almost from the beginning of their respective histories. Not only was it considered a prerequisite for church membership in both conferences, but only those baptized by immersion were then allowed to take communion in MB and KMB churches.²⁴ The early United Mennonites, on the other hand, generally practiced baptism by pouring. Isaac Peters was one of the most articulate spokespersons for baptism by pouring among Mennonites in Russia, so that when P. M. Friesen needed a dissenting opinion on this issue in his history of the Mennonite Brethren in Russia he quoted Peters.²⁵

The United Mennonites, however, were not as dogmatic on the issue of baptism as were the other two groups. At its inaugural conference in 1889 the conference stated that the mode of baptism was "nonessential" so long as it was done "on a living faith."²⁶ Even Isaac Peters eventually moderated his position, stating in 1906 that the essence of baptism does not lie in the "simple, ceremonial performance" of pouring or immersion but in the spirit which leads a person to be baptized.²⁷ Despite its tolerance for immersion the conference practiced baptism by pouring almost exclusively for the first several decades of its existence.

This difference in the mode of baptism obstructed successful relationships between the United Mennonites/Defenseless Mennonite Brethren and their immersionist counterparts. Discussions among the KMB regarding a KMB-DMB merger were undertaken at the 1921 KMB convention,²⁸ and a study committee was chosen in 1922 to examine the issue.²⁹ The discussion was

²⁴ John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers*, ed. A. J. Klassen (Fresno, Calif.: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975), 55-57, 177.

²⁵ P. M. Friesen, 306-09.

²⁶ Epp, "Sketches," 6; Wall, 5.

²⁷ Peters, "Christian Baptism with Water," 193.

²⁸ *Jahrbuch der Zweiundvierzigsten Konferenz der Krimmer Mennoniten Bruedergemeinde 1921*, p. 14.

²⁹ *Konferenzbeschlüsse der Krimmer Mennoniten Bruedergemeinde von Nord Amerika zwischen den Jahren 1882 bis 1940*, p. 45.

finally terminated in 1926 when it was decided that DMB members could not join the KMB unless they were first rebaptized.³⁰ Since few of the former were willing to take such a step, the issue died.

While actual merger discussions evidently did not take place between the DMB and MB, the mode of baptism nonetheless became a point of contention between them. Marriage between members of the two groups was frowned upon by the Mennonite Brethren, though it did occasionally occur. A group of DMB members in Paxton, Nebraska, actually met together with a Mennonite Brethren congregation for some time and even considered uniting with them, until they discovered that their Mennonite Brethren neighbors refused to take communion with nonimmersed believers. Rather than submitting to rebaptism, they founded a separate DMB church in Paxton in 1919.³¹

Since they considered the mode of baptism nonessential, many DMB congregations began immersing new members rather than continuing to struggle with their MB and KMB neighbors. This became increasingly common over the next few decades, until today all congregations in the conference practice baptism by immersion. Nonetheless, memories of past tensions have not died, and many older members continue to feel wronged by the attitude of the immersionist groups toward them.

If by the 1930s the DMB Conference (by now Evangelical Mennonite Brethren) had yet to link itself successfully with other Mennonite groups, it had not abandoned the effort. In 1938 the conference became a member of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), still today the largest and most influential of all inter-Mennonite organizations. George P. Schultz was one of the two original EMB representatives to MCC³²—another example of his leadership in inter-Mennonite relations among the EMB. Yet while Schultz led the EMB together with other Mennonites on an institutional level, his theology continued to move in an opposite direction. For it was also during the 1930s that Schultz came to the realization that he “had not been a 100% preacher of grace” but had taught instead a combination of law and grace. He came to the conclusion during this time that such a synthesis was false doctrine, and he pledged to preach from then on only a message of faith and grace.³³ What Schultz considered false doctrine, however, actually had deep roots in Anabaptist and Mennonite theology. The notion that faith could be divorced from action was foreign to most Mennonites, who believed that faith received meaning only when confirmed by proper actions.³⁴ Evidently

30 *Ibid.*, 52.

31 Interview with Katherine Wall and Elizabeth Thiessen, former members of the Paxton EMB Church, Dallas, Oreg., Dec. 16, 1981.

32 Wall, 28.

33 Arnold C. Schultz, “The Schultz Family: A History” (unpubl. MS, 1974), 15.

34 Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1973), 24-25; C. Norman Kraus, “Anabaptism and Evangelicalism,” in *Evangelicalism and Anabaptism*, ed. C. Norman Kraus (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1979), 172-75.

unaware of—or unconcerned with—the discrepancy between his theology and that of his religious predecessors, Schultz preached this message of “free grace” at evangelistic meetings in Mennonite communities across central and western North America. His preaching profoundly influenced many EMB members, and by implicitly rejecting the Anabaptist emphasis on *Nachfolge*, Schultz undoubtedly helped contribute to the loss by the EMB Conference of its Mennonite heritage.

At least partially because of this doctrinal development there was a growing hesitancy within the EMB toward affiliation with what was perceived as the liberal wing of the Mennonite church, embodied particularly by Goshen, Bethel and Bluffton Colleges. At the same time, a significant number of EMB members were increasingly concerned that their children receive a college education, preferably in a “conservative” Mennonite environment. Given this desire, the enthusiastic EMB response to the opening of Grace Bible Institute (GBI; Omaha, Nebraska) in 1943 is hardly surprising. Founded by fundamentalist General Conference Mennonites as an antidote to Bethel College’s alleged liberalism,³⁵ Grace billed itself as an inter-Mennonite institution and was thereby able to attract like-minded students from other Mennonite groups, particularly the EMB. The EMB considered the founding of Grace an answer to prayer—a school that would combine traditional Mennonite beliefs with a strictly “Bible-based” learning environment.³⁶ At a time when most Mennonite colleges had become “increasingly liberal in their theology and secular in their educational programs,”³⁷ EMBs welcomed a school which would “help to stem the liberalism then infiltrating other schools of higher education.”³⁸

EMB involvement with Grace began even before 1943. J. R. Barkman, of the Henderson EMB church, served on the GBI planning board and chaired the Joint Finance, Faculty and Policy Committee. The EMB conference of 1943 affirmed Barkman’s work by giving the new school its overwhelming moral support.³⁹ More than moral support for Grace was forthcoming from the EMB, however—it sent students as well. By the last term of the first school year 9 out of 40 students at Grace were from the EMB Conference, and the following year 25 EMB students attended Grace while only 13 attended all the other Mennonite schools combined.⁴⁰ Conference members served in faculty and administrative roles as well. John R. Dick, who would become EMB Con-

35 Rodney J. Sawatsky, “History and Ideology: American Mennonite Identity Definition through History” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1977), 169.

36 J. B. Epp, “Grace Bible Institute: A Mennonite Bible Institute,” *Gospel Tidings*, XXXIII (Aug. 15, 1943), 2.

37 Paul Kuhlmann, *The Story of Grace* (Omaha: Grace College of the Bible, 1980), 8.

38 *Ibid.*, 14.

39 *Ibid.*, 36; Wall, 31.

40 Silas Hertzler, “Attendance at Mennonite Secondary Schools and Colleges,” *MQR*, XXII (1945), 63-64.

ference president in 1948, served as GBI's first dean of men and was later named director of Christian service in the "Practical Works Department," a position he held for over ten years. Another EMB member, Anna Regier, was GBI's first woman faculty member to hold a doctoral degree.⁴¹

Though Grace initially considered itself a "Mennonite" school, this identity was soon subsumed by its more dominant "fundamentalist" identity.⁴² By aligning so closely with Grace the EMB further abandoned its Mennonite self-understanding in favor of conservative Evangelicalism, a trend which became still more pronounced when the conference joined the National Association of Evangelicals in 1945 and two independent "faith" mission boards—the Gospel Missionary Union and the Far Eastern Gospel Crusade—in 1946 and 1949, respectively.⁴³ Affiliation with these organizations, which represented a new, "moderate" Evangelicalism⁴⁴ more akin to traditional EMB beliefs than the militant Fundamentalism of the 1920s, further hastened the EMB's accommodation to Evangelicalism and broadened the gap between them and the larger Mennonite community.

Despite the growing acceptance of such outside affiliations the EMB continued to look for opportunities to unite with other Mennonite organizations, though by now they were careful to ally themselves only with those Mennonites who shared their Evangelical sympathies. One such step occurred in 1951 when the conference gained representation on the Congo Inland Mission Board (CIM). Actually the EMB had been indirectly involved with CIM (now Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission) since 1913, when the first EMB missionary went out under that board. In 1928 George P. Schultz became the first conference member on the CIM board, though he served only on a semiofficial basis. In 1951 the EMB became the third Mennonite conference to seat official delegates on the CIM board, along with the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Evangelical Mennonite Conference. Today the FEBC continues to support this mission board, one of the few inter-Mennonite projects which continue to receive its active support.

While inter-Mennonite mission links were being forged in the Congo, they were being broken in China. Since the early 1900s the conference had supported missionaries in the China Mennonite Mission Society (CMMS), together with the Mennonite Brethren, Krimmer Mennonite Brethren, and Missionary Church Association. After some time, though, the EMB missionaries fell into conflict with the MB and KMB over the form of baptism, and the conference resolved in 1946 to relinquish its rights and interests in the

41 Kuhlmann, 142.

42 Sawatsky, 169.

43 John R. Dick, "A Suggested Plan of Administration for the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Conference" (D.R.E. thesis, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1953), 217.

44 George M. Marsden, "From Fundamentalism to Evangelicalism: A Historical Analysis," in *The Evangelicals: What They Believe, Who They Are, Where They Are Changing*, ed. David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), 128-29.

CMMS rather than work with missionaries who insisted upon immersion. A compromise was reached, however, whereby the MB and KMB missionaries would begin work in the new field of Shuangshihpu and the EMB workers would continue in the old field of Tsaohsien.⁴⁵ While this arrangement seemed to resolve the immediate problem, it pointed at the same time to a continuing, deeper problem: the inability of the KMB and MB Conferences to cooperate with the EMB.

Despite these ongoing difficulties the EMB continued to explore the possibility of merging with other Mennonite conferences, a hope partially fulfilled in 1953 when it aligned itself, on a ten-year experimental basis, with the Evangelical Mennonite Conference (EMC). The EMB and EMC were by no means strangers, having first encountered each other through their respective mission projects in Chicago. Though they decided against a merger in the 1920s, the conferences continued to have cordial relations.⁴⁶ The histories of the EMB and EMC contain several common threads, undoubtedly a factor in their friendly relationship. Founded in 1866 under the name "Egly Amish," the EMC left the Old Order Amish of Indiana in protest against what they considered inadequate church discipline and spiritual vitality,⁴⁷ motivations which paralleled EMB origins. Both the EMB and EMC perceived themselves to be on the conservative end of the Mennonite theological spectrum. Both opposed what they considered a Mennonite "social gospel" and instead emphasized evangelism through soul-winning. Both groups tended to identify with American Fundamentalist causes. The EMC passed a resolution at its 1925 convention supporting William Jennings Bryan in the Scopes Trial, consistently endorsed Bob Jones University and has vocally opposed the National Council of Churches⁴⁸—all positions which would have met with approval from most EMBs.

Movement toward an EMB-EMC merger began in 1947.⁴⁹ After favorable initial contacts representatives from the two groups met several times over the next few years. In 1949 the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren were invited to join

45 Aganetha Reimer, L. H. Bartel and H. C. Bartel to the China Mennonite Mission Society Home Committee, M.B. Board of Foreign Missions, E.M.B. Board of Missions, K.M.B. Board of Missions and Missionary Church Association Board of Missions, Mar. 8, 1947, Records of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Board of Foreign Missions, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, Calif. (hereafter CMBS); "The Report of the meeting of representatives from the E.M.B., K.M.B. and M.B. conferences held at Omaha, Nebraska . . . in the interests of the China Mennonite Mission Society, November 15, 1946," Records of the KMB Board of Foreign Missions, CMBS.

46 *Mennonite Cyclopedic Dictionary*, 1937 ed., s.v. "Defenseless Mennonites."

47 "Evangelical Mennonite Church," *ME*, II, 264-66.

48 Stan Nussbaum, "You Must Be Born Again: A History of the Evangelical Mennonite Church" (unpubl. MS, 1977), 29-30.

49 "Minutes of the Joint Unity Committee of the Defenseless Mennonite Conference and the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren," Oct. 17, 1947, Records of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Conference, CMBS.

in these merger negotiations,⁵⁰ in spite of the unhappy experience of the EMB and KMB in Chinese mission work and an unsuccessful merger attempt in the 1920s. Though KMB delegates did attend some of the meetings, they made it known that a three-way merger was unlikely, largely due to their strict adherence to baptism by immersion.⁵¹ At this time both the EMB and EMC accepted either mode of baptism, though the EMB by then preferred immersion and the EMC generally poured. While KMB leaders might now have been open to a merger with the predominantly immersionist EMB, they would not accept the EMC as a third partner⁵² and thus withdrew from further negotiations.

As EMB-EMC merger discussions continued, it became increasingly clear that both groups saw affiliation as a means to strengthen the cause of "conservative" Mennonitism against the liberalism which they believed permeated most other Mennonite conferences, rather than a means for either group to strengthen ties with their Mennonite heritage. John R. Dick, then president of the EMB, saw the Mennonite world divided into two distinct factions—one Modernist, the other Evangelical. Only through unity, said Dick, could the Evangelical Mennonites counter the otherwise stronger influence of their "Modernist" counterparts.⁵³ This viewpoint was clearly articulated in the keynote addresses presented at the first EMB-EMC joint convention in 1950. Gordon Zimmerman (EMC) spoke on "The Modern Attack on Evangelical Christianity," after which John R. Dick outlined "Why We Believe We Can More Vigorously Approach This Problem Together."⁵⁴

The EMB and EMC never actually merged into one Mennonite body but rather entered into a ten-year experimental affiliation in 1953 under the name "Conference of Evangelical Mennonites." The two conferences maintained their individual identities while combining energies in certain areas. Both conferences continued to conduct their own annual meetings and came together only triennially for a joint conference. *Gospel Tidings* and *Zion's Tidings*, the respective conference papers, were replaced by the jointly edited *The Evangelical Mennonite*. The two groups sent common delegates to meetings of the National Association of Evangelicals and Mennonite Central Committee, though missionary efforts remained separate.

Despite hopes for a strong united future the Conference of Evangelical Mennonites was a short-lived venture, failing to survive beyond the ten-year

50 "Minutes of the Special Unity Committee," Jan. 11, 1949, Omaha, Nebr., Records of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Conference, CMBS.

51 "Minutes of the Joint Unity Committee Meeting," Mar. 15-16, 1949, Omaha, Nebr., Records of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Conference, CMBS.

52 John J. Kleinsasser to members of the KMB executive committee, Feb. 8, 1949, Records of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Executive Committee, CMBS.

53 Dick, *A Suggested Plan*, 218.

54 "Program: The Joint Conference of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren and the Evangelical Mennonite Church to be held on May 30 to June 1, 1950, at the Grace Bible Institute, Omaha, Nebraska," *Gospel Tidings*, XXXIX (Apr. 1, 1950), 6.

experimentation stage. Long before 1962, however, it had become obvious that a permanent merger was unlikely. When the two groups could have been getting better acquainted, they chose instead to perpetuate their own unique identities. Rather than combining energies to accomplish tasks otherwise impossible, they focused primarily on individual projects and concerns. Since little more than a token effort toward meaningful unity appears to have been expended during these ten years, it came as little surprise that the EMB and EMC parted ways in 1962.

The "official" reasons for annulling the affiliation were "geographic distribution . . . , the problem of synchronizing methods in the mission program . . . , and that said affiliation did not appear to resolve the problem of higher education for the two bodies."⁵⁵ Of these factors geography was generally cited most often, and not without reason. Virtually all EMB churches were located in the western half of the continent, while all but a few EMC congregations were located east of the Mississippi River, reducing opportunities for interaction between members of the two groups. Differing attitudes toward mission programs also stood in the way of merger. The EMB expected its missionaries to raise their own support, while the EMC fully supported its missionaries. A merger would have required that these differing policies be brought into line, a step never undertaken.⁵⁶ Finally, an "Evangelical Mennonite" college proved unfeasible even for a unified conference. The combined membership of the two conferences at the time was only about five thousand, hardly enough to support their own school. Apparently the Conference of Evangelical Mennonites was unrealistic about its ability to undertake such a venture, though it had been a primary motivating factor for their affiliation.

Probably none of these factors would have prevented an EMB-EMC merger had both groups strongly desired to unite. This does not seem to have been the case, however. According to one EMC church leader of the time, "there was no strong feeling on either side" to work out an actual merger.⁵⁷ This lack of enthusiasm is illustrated by the attitude toward the triennial joint conventions. Conducted in 1951 on an experimental basis, and again in 1953 and 1955, the General Board voted not to hold such meetings after 1955. These conventions provided the only opportunities for significant numbers of lay members from the two groups to meet together; after 1955 only a handful of conference leaders were able to maintain direct contact between the two conferences. Nor did the joint conference paper provide a forum for significant EMB-EMC interaction. EMB president Henry Brandt commented to EMC president Reuben Short in 1960, "We have two church papers bound

55 "EMB & EMC Dissolve Affiliation," *The Evangelical Mennonite*, X (Sept. 15, 1962), 3.

56 Frank G. Thomas, "Affiliation or Merger? Where Do We Stand?" *The Evangelical Mennonite*, IX (Mar. 15, 1962), 17.

57 Reuben Short to Kevin Rempel, Jan. 21, 1982 (letter in possession of author).

under one cover and one name.”⁵⁸ In the same letter Brandt went on to question whether two such “unacquainted” groups should enter into a permanent relationship.

Though the EMB and EMC parted on friendly terms and publicly claimed to be “still one at heart,”⁵⁹ the two groups parted company with scarcely a backward glance. Though the reasons for this drifting apart were certainly many, perhaps the EMB was unwilling to work toward a permanent merger with the EMC because its members had finally grown weary of inter-Mennonite relationships. After 1962 the EMB increasingly defined itself as “Evangelical” rather than “Mennonite” and even began consciously to disown its Mennonite heritage in favor of mainstream Evangelicalism. Evidently the tensions between the EMB’s Anabaptist-Mennonite religious tradition and its more recent association with American Evangelicalism and revivalism had reached such a point that the conference was no longer able to balance between the two. To be true to one demanded a critique of the other. Faced with this dilemma, the EMB chose Evangelicalism.

The year 1969 marked a watershed in the EMB’s gradual rejection of Mennonitism, as revealed in three events which took place during the EMB conference that year. The tone of the conference was set early by President Frank C. Wiens’ keynote address, “This We Believe,” in which he attempted to shed light on the identity of the EMB through a study of the three words constituting its name. The word “Evangelical” presented no problem for Wiens. He stated that “as a conference we have held firmly to the EVANGELICAL position,” the doctrines of which “are alive and meaningful to us,” and urged the conference “to be EVANGELICAL in every sense of the word.”⁶⁰ The tone changed, however, when Wiens turned to the word “Mennonite.” While acknowledging “the biblical foundation on which the Mennonite Church was founded,” he raised concerns about

the apostasy of those who say they are also MENNONITE. . . . [We] are deeply concerned when many within the greater MENNONITE fellowship no longer clearly declare these basic truths. The defection of a segment of the MENNONITE Church to tradition, culture, and the preaching of a mere social gospel has left us in a quandry [*sic*] as to who we are.⁶¹

Wiens’ concerns were given substance during the 1969 convention discussion regarding EMB participation in the Mennonite Central Committee. For several years the EMB had been somewhat uncomfortable with MCC relief programs. The EMB preferred evangelistic outreach which focused on saving souls, and therefore distrusted MCC’s concern regarding physical and social

58 Henry Brandt to Reuben Short, May 10, 1960, Records of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Conference, CMBS.

59 John R. Dick, “Still One at Heart,” *The Evangelical Mennonite*, X (Sept. 15, 1962), 3.

60 Frank C. Wiens, “This We Believe,” *Gospel Tidings*, IX (Aug. 1969), i-1.

61 *Ibid.*, 1.

needs as well as spiritual ones. The conference severed its ties with MCC at the 1969 convention, leaving open the option to participate on a local church and individual basis.⁶² This withdrawal from MCC, though based on different views of evangelism, ought perhaps to be understood rather as part of the EMB disenchantment with Mennonites in general. Probably no single organization represented the prevailing Mennonite ideals so clearly as MCC, and thus it is not surprising that the EMB would have wanted little to do with it. Because MCC was a symbol of a larger whole no longer considered desirable, the EMB chose to divorce itself from that symbol.

The third important event at the 1969 convention was a discussion regarding the conference name. In and of itself, such a discussion was not highly significant. The conference had already changed its name twice—once in 1917 and again in 1937. What gave significance to the debate was that this time the discussion focused on the word “Mennonite.” For the first time, the EMB Conference officially raised the question of whether they even wished to be identified with Mennonitism. Though no final decisions were made at the convention, a committee was formed to study the question further and bring a proposal to a later convention.⁶³

The arguments for and against a change in name were probably best summarized in a 1971 article by former conference president John R. Dick, “Shall We Retain or Omit the Name Mennonite?”⁶⁴ In favor of maintaining the existing name, Dick pointed to the “biblical and evangelical” foundations of the Mennonite tradition, about which “we need not hang our heads in shame or embarrassment.” Second, he reminded conference members that even with a name change the Mennonite identity of the conference would remain for many years, thereby lessening the impact of a new name. Finally, Dick questioned whether the conference ought to risk severing ties with other Mennonite groups, a likely side effect of abandoning the Mennonite label. On the other hand, Dick blamed the Mennonite name for hindering church growth in the conference and suggested that significant growth generally occurred only in those areas where the Mennonite label was not prominently displayed. Though “the name ‘Mennonite’ is not alone to blame for our lack of outreach,” said Dick, “neither can it be ignored as a stumbling block” to evangelism. Also, the EMB Conference did not identify itself strongly with its Mennonite heritage, most pastors were not deeply rooted in Mennonite theological training, the majority of EMB missionaries went out under independent faith missions rather than Mennonite ones, and EMB students generally attended non-Mennonite Bible schools and colleges. Given this tenuous attachment to the larger Mennonite world, suggested Dick, perhaps a change of name was appropriate.

62 “Highlights of the ‘69 Convention,” *Gospel Tidings*, IX (Aug. 1969), 13.

63 *Ibid.*, 13.

64 *Gospel Tidings*, XI (Jan. 1971), 4, 6.

EMB discomfort with a Mennonite identity can be understood on two levels, and it seems likely that most EMBs who voiced such discomfort did so for one or both of the reasons. First, many EMB members questioned Mennonitism on theological grounds. Frank C. Wiens' reference to "apostasy" and "mere social gospel" in his 1969 conference address certainly indicated such a theological tension. A. P. Toews, another prominent conference leader, accused Mennonite colleges and seminaries of being theologically liberal and labeled one widely read Mennonite paper "anti-evangelical,"⁶⁵ citing these as reasons to drop the Mennonite name.

How much of this EMB opposition to Mennonite "liberalism" was actually a misinterpretation of that tradition? The influence of Evangelicalism and its emphasis on personal benefit and eternal security undoubtedly encouraged many EMBs to perceive the Anabaptist-Mennonite stress on discipleship and responsibility to the community of God as "anti-evangelicalism." It is conceivable that the desire for rapid church growth so prevalent in the EMB Conference during the prior several decades led the conference to turn toward the Evangelical option, under the assumption that Mennonite theology had no room for evangelism.

The second level of tension was also related to the issue of evangelism but focused on the "ethnic" dimensions of the Mennonite tradition rather than on Mennonite theology. The fact that Mennonites have traditionally been an ethnoreligious group was considered by some to be a barrier to evangelism. These individuals believed that by changing the name and abandoning visible ethnic characteristics, outsiders would be more apt to join the EMB Conference. John R. Dick certainly pointed to this problem when listing reasons for changing the name—as did Frank C. Wiens—by suggesting in 1969 that many Mennonites had fallen victim to tradition and culture.⁶⁶ Many EMBs seemed to believe that by abandoning their Mennonite identity and embracing a "culturally neutral" Evangelical one, they would transcend the constraints of their ethnoreligious tradition.

Sociologist Calvin Redekop has pointed out the faulty logic behind the EMB attempt to abandon its ethnic identity in his 1981 article, "The Embarrassment of a Religious Tradition." According to Redekop, one errs "by assuming that the true essence of faith . . . does not come out of a historical context, but rather abstractly 'out of nowhere.'" ⁶⁷ The EMB rejection of Mennonite identity is not a means of transcending cultural limitations but "is in reality the justification or rationalization for the adoption of an alternative

65 A. P. Toews, "A Prospectous [*sic*] of the EMB Name Change," *Gospel Tidings*, X (Dec. 1970), 9, 10.

66 Wiens, 1. This was a common theme in letters to the editor in *Gospel Tidings* during the period. See, for example, Marj Janzten, *Gospel Tidings*, XI (Mar. 1971), 14; and R. D. Schmidt, *Gospel Tidings*, XI (Apr. 1971), 6, 13.

67 Redekop, "Embarrassment," 17.

'ideological community' and culture."⁶⁸ The EMB has been unable to recognize the same cultural limitations in Evangelicalism that they criticize in Mennonitism—which has led to what Redekop calls "a short-circuited conclusion to the issue."⁶⁹ The concept of a distinct "people of God" is by definition inseparably linked to some form of ethnicity, and it is impossible to have one without the other. As Redekop so aptly stated, ". . . when the ghost of ethnicity has been sloughed off, so have most chances for becoming the 'people of God.'"⁷⁰

It should be noted that there *were* people in the EMB Conference of the early 1970s who saw the problems inherent in abandoning the Mennonite identity. One of the most articulate was H. F. Epp, *Gospel Tidings* editor from 1946 to 1950, who pointed out that an insufficient understanding of Mennonite history had helped to foster the desire for a name change. He argued that even though some other Mennonites may have fallen into "legalistic orthodoxy" or "sterile liberalism" this was no time to abandon the Mennonite identity. Instead, the conference should rededicate itself to its New Testament Mennonite heritage, just as the original EMB had done in the face of apostate Mennonite neighbors in 1889.⁷¹

Those comfortable with a Mennonite identity won the first round of the name change struggle; a recommendation at the 1973 convention to change the conference name to "Fellowship of Evangelical Churches" failed to pass.⁷² This vote brought the discussion to a halt for several years, but those who opposed the "Mennonite" label were not silenced for long and the question was once again raised at the 1980 and 1981 conventions. The matter came to a vote in 1982 but was again narrowly defeated by a count of 108-95. A motion to place a ten-year moratorium on further discussion of a name change was suggested but rejected by a vote of 119-84.⁷³ At the 1986 conference the issue was again raised but tabled until the following year. Finally, during the early hours of the ninety-third annual convention in Steinbach, Manitoba, in July 1987, the delegates voted by a 74% majority to become the "Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches."

The Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches is a conference at odds with its religious tradition. This tension has played a part in the conference's history since its beginnings, when Isaac Peters and Aaron Wall severed ties with their neighboring Mennonites. Their establishment as a new Mennonite conference cut down on both religious and social interaction with other Mennonites, thereby lessening the chances for reconciliation. Despite their

68 *Ibid.*, 20.

69 *Ibid.*, 21.

70 Redekop, "Ethnic Ghost," 146.

71 Henry F. Epp, "Re-emphasis, Re-dedication, Instead of Change," *Gospel Tidings*, XI (Feb. 1971), 5.

72 1972 *Annual Report: The Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Conference 78th Convention*, p. 76.

73 1982 *Annual Report: The Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Conference 88th Convention*, p. 35.

differences, however, the conference continued to seek fellowship with like-minded Mennonites rather than leaving the denomination altogether. This decision was certainly influenced by the fact that for the first several decades of its existence the United Mennonites/Defenseless Mennonite Brethren remained an immigrant religious group, and thus the barriers of language and culture between them and "American" churches were even greater than whatever barriers stood between them and other Mennonites. As time went on, these barriers to American religiosity began to crumble. By the end of World War II EMBs had largely adopted the English language and were eagerly absorbing the views of Evangelical theology and education. Finding the Evangelical perspective to its liking, the EMB found it easier to sever its ties to other Mennonite groups. No longer did it need other Mennonites to provide it with the sense of identity and belonging necessary for the survival of any group. This need could now be fulfilled by Evangelicalism. As the EMB increasingly received its sustenance from Evangelical sources, it began to perceive its Mennonite identity as a liability and sought means of shedding both the label and the underlying religious understanding. The 1987 decision to change the conference name, seen in this light, is merely the most recent in a long series of actions by a conference in search of a religious identity to call its own.