

Mennonites in Southern California: An Interpretive Essay

by Jeff Wright

Twenty years ago, the Anabaptist presence in Southern California was in serious decline.

In 1978, a handful of churches from the Mennonite (MC), General Conference (GC), Brethren in Christ (BIC), and Mennonite Brethren (MB) denominations labored to maintain the traditional boundaries and identity of their more Eastern counterparts, while losing both membership, and increasingly, identity as a unique expression of New Testament Christianity. Fewer than twenty churches among the four denominational groups labored, often with little knowledge of each other across denominational lines. As late as 1985, the conventional wisdom among seminarians of the day was that Southern California was a wasteland. As one student put it to me at the time, “the Mennonite world ends on the south edge of Bakersfield.”

Twenty years later, a diverse community of churches are exploding across the Southern California basin. As of July 1998, some fifty-six Anabaptist churches of these four denominational groups live and witness to Christ in Southern California. These congregations represent over a dozen different cultural groups and worship in at least seven different languages. How did this change happen, and what might the Anabaptist future in Southern California look like?

A Brief Interpretive History

Mennonites came to Southern California in search of economic fulfillment. In the 1890s, the first wave of Mennonite migration to Southern California came to work in the citrus industry. Mennonites fit well into the early urban landscape of Southern California with its “Iowa on the Pacific” perspective. A number of small towns, such as Upland, where many early Mennonites settled, were loosely linked by key rail connections, giving a strong local, small-town identity.

These Mennonites established roots and became prosperous land owners, farmers and small business owners. Churches in Upland (First Mennonite, Seventh Street, later Mountain View, and Upland Brethren in Christ) were the central point of the Anabaptist-Mennonite church in Southern California. Several institutions in the Upland area, such as a sanitarium, and a Brethren in Christ College (Upland College) were founded between World War I and World War II. A cluster of Mennonite congregations were also founded in Los Angeles between 1916 and 1930.

The second wave of Mennonite migration to Southern California came in years around World War II. Many Mennonites passed through Los Angeles earlier, during the depression, but they were, in main, on their way to somewhere else. Mennonites settled in Southern California during the pre-war and war years

in search for jobs, and many were employed in the emerging aircraft industry, and ancillary industries. These Mennonites were less rooted to the land as the first wave had been. As this generation of Southern California Mennonites began to share in the postwar prosperity, they began to move into the new cities of Southern California. Established congregations in Los Angeles County faced urban migration that changed the local demographic of the community in which they ministered. Calvary Mennonite (founded 1916) became an African-American congregation in the 1960s. City Terrace Bible (MB) Church evolved from an European-American congregation to a principally Latino congregation in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Churches were founded in the new emerging communities of Southeast Los Angeles County (e.g., Santa Fe Springs, 1957; Downey, 1961). However, the existing Mennonite churches began to face decline as children and grandchildren of the first two waves of Mennonite migrations began to move out of the Mennonite Church.

A third wave of Mennonite migration began in the early 1980s and continues today. Again, economic opportunity is fueling this migration. The difference is that most of these new Mennonites are not European, and were not Mennonites before coming to Southern California. Significant

church planting began among African-American, African (Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Ethiopian), Latino (Mexican and Central American), Indonesian (mainly of Chinese ethnicity), Taiwanese, Japanese, Korean and “Generation X” communities, and continues to this day. But what are the issues that have fueled this growth of a new Mennonite community?

Factors Fueling Growth

At least four factors have fueled the expansion of the Anabaptist-Mennonite churches in Southern California. First, people of vision served in key leadership roles in the 1980s and called forth broad church support for evangelism and church planting. Allan Yoder, Southwest Mennonite Conference Area Minister, and Don Shafer, Bishop of the Pacific Conference of the Brethren in Christ, were both passionate strategists around evangelism and church planting issues. Both conferences led the way in planting new churches, with the Southwest Conference (MC) taking the lead in planting churches in Los Angeles County, and the Pacific Conference (BIC) taking the lead in planting churches in the rapidly growing “Inland Empire” of extreme eastern Los Angeles, southwest San Bernardino and western Riverside Counties.

Second, a dialogue between historic Anabaptism and third-wave charismatic renewal led to a common theological context. In other places, Anabaptists have been suspicious of charismatic expressions of spirituality. In Southern California, particularly among the integrating Mennonite and General Conference Mennonite Churches, there has been a high level of acceptance, even an embrace, of the historic Anabaptist Vision of discipleship, community and nonresistance,

and the contemporary charismatic themes of worship renewal, intercessory prayer and expressions of so-called “sign gifts” (e.g., speaking in tongues). For whatever reasons, most Mennonite churches have failed to see a conflict between these perspectives and have developed a theological matrix that allows for a neo-Pentecostal expression of historic Anabaptism.

Third, there has been a commitment to build grassroots institutions. Judicatory leadership has been evident since the former South Pacific Mennonite Conference (the precursor to the Southwest Mennonite Conference and today’s MC-GC integrated Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference) appointed a bishop/overseer in the 1960s. However, the growth and vitality of the Southern California Anabaptist community has come through a partnership between judicatories and grassroots institutions. The founding of what is now known as The Center for Anabaptist Leadership in 1987, was the first of a new generation of grassroots groups that sought to mobilize churches within the region around a broad mandate of service, evangelism and mission. The repurchasing of the campus of the former Upland College by the Brethren in Christ, and the subsequent creation of the Pacific Conference Center has been a boon to the BIC community. Most recently, the formation of a Southern California Mennonite Central Committee Relief Sale has also provided another venue of grassroots involvement.

Fourth, there has been a significant commitment to the formation of a multi-racial church in Southern California. In spite of a past where European Anabaptists in North America did not always have a good track record on issues of race and

tolerance, the church in Southern California has developed a strong record on being a church of many peoples. The Southwest Mennonite Conference was served by Stanley Green, a South African of color, and James Issacs, an African-American, as Area Ministers, following the departure of the bilingual Allan Yoder, who had grown up as the son of missionaries in Cuba. Today, most of the integrated Mennonite Church leadership in southern California is non-European. Of twenty-nine churches affiliated with the Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference, only five of these churches are majority European-American in membership. Total European-American church membership comprises about 11 percent of total church membership. Mennonite Brethren numbers would also approximate this trend. Wile Brethren in Christ membership is far more European-American, there is a growing Latino movement within the BIC churches of Southern California.

Next Steps

Anabaptists-Mennonites came to Southern California looking for the Californian Dream—good jobs, good schools and a good home. They built a church through visionary leadership and dialogue between historic Anabaptism and contemporary charismatic renewal. This church has become capable of building local grassroots organizations in a multi-racial context. Given that past and present, what are the cutting edges for the future of Anabaptists in Southern California?

First, the search for the California Dream continues, and churches are faced with the challenge of “bootstrap stewardship,” in an era of prosperity. As this new wave of

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immigrant new Anabaptists continues to grow, basic economic development will continue to be a dominant challenge. Insuring that new Anabaptist brothers and sisters have access to the economic levers, and can assist others in their communities through economic empowerment is a primary ministry.

Second, there is clear need for greater cross-denominational effort in equipping for local and global mission. The three major Anabaptist-Mennonite conferences at work in Southern California (Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference; Pacific Conference of the Brethren in Christ; Pacific District of the Mennonite Brethren) still do precious little cooperation at the regional level. Grassroots efforts (as described above) can only go so far in uniting congregations for mission. The missing ingredient to a real explosion of effective, faithful Anabaptist evangelism is cooperation at the regional level. Grassroots leaders in all three conferences are working with a metropolitan-wide vision, but they have lacked the support from judicatory structures to unite as effectively as they could.

Finally, there is a need for the church in Southern California to become multi-generational. Billy Graham has said, "God has

no grandchildren." And he is right. At the same time, congregations as faith communities need a variety of age ranges to transmit the gospel from one generation to the next. The search for the California Dream led a generation of European-American Mennonites away from the church in the 1940s and again in the 1970s. As this generation of churches find their children no longer worshipping in Korean, Spanish, Indonesian or Japanese, will there be people of vision and flexible systems to help these children adapt and remain in the church, albeit a new, transforming church?

Anabaptist-Mennonites in Southern California are unlike their counterparts across the rest of North America. Nowhere else in North America is the economic side of the faith story so clearly evident. Nowhere else is there such a high comfort level with charismatic renewal informing and shaping historic Anabaptism. Nowhere else is there such an ethnic and denominational diversity in an urban, metropolitan center. Nowhere else is the North American Anabaptist-Mennonite movement growing so quickly. While it is a far from perfect expression of the church, it is, nevertheless, a sign of the in-breaking Reign of God in our midst.

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