

Introduction

During the 1994-1995 academic year Fresno Pacific College is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary. In the history of American colleges, that is a short history. Yet fifty years is also an appropriate time to reflect on a college's story. This collection of essays is not, strictly speaking, a history of the college. Joel A. Wiebe already has written an institutionally sponsored history—*Remembering . . . Reaching: A Vision of Service*—for the fiftieth anniversary celebrations.¹ This slender volume has a more narrow focus. It seeks to describe the idealism that has shaped the college, particularly the liberal arts phase since 1960.

The opening in the fall of 1944 of Pacific Bible Institute—the precursor to Fresno Pacific College—was the fulfillment of a dream long held among Mennonite Brethren on the West Coast. Mennonite Brethren congregations were first established in California's San Joaquin Valley during the first decade of the twentieth century.² By 1916 the five MB congregations on the West Coast were already discussing the need for a school in California. In so doing, they expressed sentiments deeply embedded in the Mennonite Brethren imagination. The Mennonite Brethren commitment to the schooling of the next generation dates back to the origin of the denomination in 1860 in the Russian empire. Among the elements present in the formation of the new group was a yearning for greater educational and cultural freedom than was practiced within the authoritarian structure of the Mennonite colonies in Russia. A disproportionate number of young teachers eager to explore how Western European learning and culture might reinvigorate Russian Mennonite religious life were part of the initial Mennonite Brethren movement.³

The subsequent history of Russian Mennonite migration to North America, beginning in the 1870s, includes the establishment of

schools almost as quickly as that of congregations. In 1908 the MB Church founded Tabor College in Hillsboro, Kansas, its own four-year liberal arts college.⁴ In the West, the Reedley, California settlement was established in 1905, and by 1910 it began a winter Bible school program.

In 1922 a private educational society was established by interested Mennonite Brethren in the central San Joaquin area. Through the sale of \$100 memberships they hoped to establish Bethany College in order to provide every young Mennonite Brethren with "a religious as well as a scientific education."⁵ That project was finally realized in 1944.

The reasons for the delay are numerous. The intervening years witnessed political and economic stresses that alone were sufficient to delay such a venture: the trauma of being Germanic in two world wars, the economics of becoming established, coping with the Depression, and the absorption of countless new migrants from the Midwest. But the more serious reasons for the delay were theological.

The impulse to build a school was rooted in the need to insure that MB young people would receive appropriate denominational understandings. Denominational schools are typically nurseries of denominational piety. They shelter people from the corrosive impact of alien ways. But the question of what is to be mediated to the next generation can sometimes become unclear.

The 1920s to the 1940s was such a time of uncertainty for West Coast Mennonite Brethren. Some of them were drawn to American Fundamentalism, an aggressive and crusading movement to fight cultural and theological modernism. During the 1920s and 1930s, as the fundamentalist-modernist debate polarized American Protestantism, Mennonite Brethren instinctively leaned into the conservative camp. They did so without the slightest hint of theological modernism in their denomination. As an immigrant group still feeling like outsiders, they might have been put off by the Americanness of fundamentalism, yet in a world of simple dichotomies they stood with the fundamentalists. Other Mennonite Brethren found new freedom in the Pentecostal-Holiness movement that contrasted with their own restrained and codified piety.⁶

While a conservative theology emphasizing doctrinal certitude and expressive piety historically have been part of the Mennonite Brethren, they were now highlighted in some quarters as being more true and necessary than previously. As these interests gained ascendancy among those fostering the development of the new

school, one observer reflected the theological differences present in the early 1940s: "many of our old standbys are not at all in sympathy with what these men are trying to feed us. . . . They constantly speak of having a school in which we instruct our young people in the ways and beliefs of our fathers, but if our fathers would arise from the dead and observe, I am sure they would not recognize some of our ways."⁷

This uncertainty about what kind of school and what kinds of theology would best nurture the Mennonite Brethren was not yet resolved when Pacific Bible Institute opened in 1944. It began very much in the tradition of the American Bible institute with objectives, program and character consonant with similar institutions across the country. To be sure, it also had some denominational distinctives, and it flourished during the first years. From a beginning enrollment of 28 students in 1944 it grew rapidly to 178 students by 1949. Then began a persistent decline that reached a low of 57 students in 1958. Clearly a different kind of institution and educational ideal was necessary to attract the support of West Coast Mennonite Brethren.

In the late 1950s Pacific Bible Institute began a metamorphosis that turned it into Fresno Pacific College, a liberal arts college. In 1956 the decision was made to add a junior college curriculum to the Bible institute program. By 1965 the college earned full accreditation as a baccalaureate institution and ten year later, in 1975, it was authorized to offer Master's degrees.

The decline of the Bible institute program and the necessity of moving toward a liberal arts institution created possibilities of many kinds. It was a time for asking fundamental questions. What kind of college should emerge? What kinds of philosophical, religious and educational ideals should shape the transformed institution? To answer those questions the institution's Board of Education, in 1960, hired Arthur Wiebe as the new President. Wiebe, together with a new faculty that he recruited, began the task of rethinking questions of institutional mission and identity. The result of their process of planning and inquiry would eventually be articulated as the "Fresno Pacific College Idea." That idea has since shaped much of the self-understanding and development of the college. It has been the lodestar that has guided many college decisions. Faculty in particular have been prone to ask how every new program matches with the idea statement. Invoking the idea has been a bit like calling up a sacred mantra that could either legitimate what at first glance seemed an unacceptable suggestion, or tarnish and even cast into oblivion established practices. The idea has been used both to

protect and extend the institution's center and boundaries. Like the ideation that shaped the Pacific Bible Institute years, the "FPC Idea" has also had its critics and supporters. The debate about institutional identity and mission did not end with the formulation of the Idea statement. But the statement has been at the center of all subsequent discussions about the meaning of Fresno Pacific College.

The Fresno Pacific College Idea when it was first formulated in 1966 contained seven essential ideas:

- Pacific College is a Christian College
- Pacific College is a Community
- Pacific College is a Liberal Arts College
- Pacific College is an Experimental College
- Pacific College is an Anabaptist-Mennonite College
- Pacific College is a Non-Sectarian College
- Pacific College is a Prophetic College

For all of the power that the idea has had in the life of the institution, it has never received a full explication. These essays seek to understand the factors producing the idea statement, offer extended explication of its central elements, and examine its continuing role in the life of the college. They offer not a chronological development of Fresno Pacific College, but are a perhaps more elusive attempt to understand the ferment of ideas and conviction that have been the ideational core of the college.

The history of institutional development is the layering of programs, of diversification, of programmatic enlargement. Amidst the growth and even fragmentation that accompanies most stories of institutional development is the attempt to maintain a synoptic vision. The tension in maintaining a distinctive core while serving ever more publics is not uncommon to Christian colleges. This quest for the distinctive and appropriate ideational core not only defines institutional mission but also energizes a school. While debates about core institutional ideas may seem arcane and even superfluous to the supporters and friends of a college, and sometimes even to trustees, they are necessary and critical for institutional survival. In fact, those Christian colleges that are most successful are probably those that have worked hardest at defining such an ideational core and then worked at juxtaposing and balancing it with the needs of the world around them.

These essays are part of the ongoing discussion about that balancing act. They are the singular interpretations of the authors. Unlike

the Idea itself, these interpretations have not been canonized through the interminable process of dialogue that Mennonites sometimes call the "hermeneutics of community." For the most part they were written by people with long tenure at the college. With the exception of John Yoder, the authors have been associated with the college for at least twenty-five years. They reflect a history of concern, conviction and even leadership in defining Fresno Pacific's ideational core. They do reflect the love affair that many of us have with this little college, an affair rooted in the idealism of the "Fresno Pacific College Idea."

NOTES

1. Joel A. Wiebe, *Remembering . . . Reaching: A Vision of Service – A Fifty Year History of Fresno Pacific College* (Fresno Calif.: Fresno Pacific College, 1994).

2. See Kevin Enns-Rempel, "A New Life in the West: Settlement and Colonization on the Pacific Coast," in *75 Years of Fellowship: Pacific District Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1912-1987*, ed. Esther Jost (Fresno Calif.: Pacific District Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1987), 9-23.

3. The historiography on the origins of the Mennonite Brethren in Russia is extensive. Selected important works include: Peter M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)*, trans. and ed. J. B. Toews, et al. (Fresno, Calif.: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978); John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrim and Pioneers* (Fresno, Calif.: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975); John B. Toews, *Perilous Journey: the Mennonite Brethren in Nineteenth Century Russia, 1860-1910* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1988); James Urry, "The Social Background to the Emergence of the Mennonite Brethren in Nineteenth Century Russia," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 6 (1988): 8-35; Paul Toews, "Differing Historical Imaginations and the Changing Identity of the Mennonite Brethren," in *Anabaptism Revisited: Essays on Anabaptist/Mennonite studies in honor of C. J. Dyck*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1992), 155-172.

4. For the history of Tabor see Wesley J. Prieb and Don Ratzlaff, *To a Higher Plane of Vision* (Hillsboro, Kans.: Tabor College, 1983); William Schmidt, "A History of Tabor College" (M.A. thesis, University of Wichita, 1961); Paul Toews, "Henry W. Lohrenz and Tabor College," *Mennonite Life* 38 (September 1983): 11-19.

5. See report in *Verhandlungen der dreizehnten Pacific Distrikt-Konferenz der M. B. Gemeinde, abgehalten vom 11. bis 14. November, 1922, zu Dallas, Oregon*, 22.

6. I have more fully explored some of these theological issues in "'A Shelter In a Time of Storm': The Establishment of Schools in the Pacific District," in *75 Years of Fellowship*, 57-70.

7. Robert C. Seibel to Henry W. Lohrenz, 3 July 1944, Henry W. Lohrenz Papers, Correspondence: R. C. Seibel, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, Calif.