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The Concern Movement: Its Origins and Early History

Paul Toews

I. Seemingly innocent but far-reaching

It seemed innocent enough: seven American Mennonites meeting in Amsterdam in April of 1952 for what was described as a two-week theological retreat. The purpose was to gain a better understanding of their own Mennonite experiences and current theological issues. Irvin B. Horst, John W. Miller, Paul Peachey, Calvin Redekop, David A. Shank, Orley Swartzentruber, and John Howard Yoder were young intellectuals in Europe either attending graduate schools or working in the service of MCC and church mission agencies. It would be a chance to talk over questions of mutual interest; a chance to spend two weeks speaking English instead of Dutch, German, or French; an opportunity to learn more of the Dutch Mennonite story from distinguished Dutch scholars. The schedule was marked by European civility—two lectures a day with the evening given to “diverting subjects.” A trip to Friesland during the intervening weekend would permit visiting the Mennonite holy shrines.

It seemed innocent enough. Yet from the beginning there were hints that it might be something more than a two-week retreat. There had been one earlier European meeting of such young American Mennonites. In 1919 people serving with the American Friends Service Committee in post World War I reconstruction met at Clermont-en-Argonne, France. The ruckus of that meeting rippled through the home churches in ways the participants could not have imagined. While history need not repeat itself, the experiences of those gathering in Amsterdam were in some ways analogous to the experiences of those who met in France in 1919.¹

Like their counterparts 34 years earlier, they were the exceptions of the American Mennonite story. All seven were graduates of either Goshen or Eastern Mennonite College. All pursued graduate degrees and secured doctorates. They were a generation set apart by their participation in the social reconstruction of Europe during the postwar period. Nurtured in the Mennonite parochial

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1 See Walter N. Rutt, J. C. Meyer, and C. C. Janzen, editors, *Report of General Conference of Mennonites in France in Reconstruction Work, held at Clermont-en-Argonne, Meuse, France, June 20-22, 1919* (n.p., ca. 1919), Guy F. Hershberger, “Historical Background to the Formation of the Mennonite Central Committee,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 44 (July 1970) 233-235

environment, their European experience brought them into direct conversation with the ideological debates of Western culture living in the shadow of Auschwitz and Hiroshima.

They were also the heirs of an enormously creative generation that had preceded them. They were the recipients of a Mennonite intellectual tradition far more expansive than the one given to their fathers and grandfathers. Their studies only expanded the inheritance. Running through their meeting and subsequent early writings were references to and intimations of neo-orthodoxy (Tillich, Barth, Brunner, the Niebuhrs), Anabaptism (Bender, Hershberger, Troeltsch); 20th-century literary criticism (T.S. Eliot, C.S. Lewis); and social theory (Marx, Weber, Tonnies, Durkheim). They worked in the diverse fields of biblical, theological, historical, missiological, and sociological studies. To their theorizing they brought familiarity both with American and European scholarship. The papers they read to each other at Amsterdam suggested something of their intellectual and critical abilities.

Paul Peachey's contribution to the meeting, "Toward an Understanding of the Decline of the West,"² was one of the more ambitious interpretations of Western history to appear in 20th century Mennonite scholarship. He described the underpinnings of the West as a medieval Christian and modern humanistic worldview. By the mid-20th century both gods had failed and the Western world stood shorn of any sustaining hope. The Protestant Reformation could have offered an alternative, but did not because it failed to repudiate the *corpus christianum*. "Since its attitude toward the world was assimilative rather than prophetic, responsible rather than catalytic, it too became imbedded in all the incongruities of the status quo."³ It remained orthodox in the Catholic sense but contributed to the secularization of the humanist tradition by properly failing to distinguish the faith from the culture.

The death of the *corpus christianum* ideal now rendered an opening for the church to disentangle itself from worldly preoccupations and alliances. The most urgent task facing the church was the fresh articulation of an appropriate Christian social ethic.

The appropriate shape of that ethic was suggested in John Howard Yoder's paper, "The Anabaptist Dissent: The Logic of the Place of the Disciple in Society." Yoder outlined a sectarian position. Sectarian not in the ecclesiological sense of separation from other churches or in the epistemological sense as the "sole possessor of the truth" but in the sociological sense of withdrawing from society. The distinguishing characteristic of the sect was "its refusal to assume

2 Paul Peachey, "Toward an Understanding of the Decline of the West," *Concern* 1, June 1954, pp. 8-44.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

responsibility for the moral structure of non-Christian society.”⁴ The rejection rested in the dichotomy between God’s work in the order of conservation and the order of redemption. What divided the sectarian ethicists and the responsible ones was the presence of evil in the world. In Yoder’s analysis the responsibility position by appealing so rigorously to the presence of sin, ended up invalidating ethical principles that might achieve the good. The sectarian “refuses to flatten God’s goodness.”⁵

Orley Swartzentruber’s paper, “An Estimate of Current American Mennonitism,” made it clear that the home church was not the bearer of that appropriate ethic. While Anabaptism contained an “utter disregard for the sociological unity of the *corpus christianum*” American Mennonitism was “a self-conscious sociological reality.” The *corpus christianum* had been transmuted into the “*corpus mennonitarium*.” The change resulted from the conservatism and naivete of the church. The church’s strength lay not in its theological or intellectual acumen but in the strength of its sociological institutions. But their orientation to preservation made them the unwitting progenitors of this new *corpus christianum*, albeit Mennonite style.⁶

This indictment of the American church fit with larger patterns of Anabaptist history that these young intellectuals discerned. Irvin Horst’s contribution was to document the loss of the 16th-century vision among Dutch Mennonites. It was the story of assimilation that proceeded from integration into the economic realm, then the cultural and finally the political. The American analogy was all too evident.

If it seemed innocent enough, the conference summary insured that the effect of this gathering would also ripple out and eventually engulf much of the church. Participants had come to see the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition from a perspective in which a “‘freedom-discipline’ antithesis, and a ‘pneumatic-institutional’ antithesis appear in the context of an ‘assimilation-preservation’ antithesis.” The three contradictory currents were observable both in the European and American contexts. While professing uncertainty as to where American Mennonites were in the assimilation-preservation tension, they were clear that patterns of assimilation threatened the home church. “That there is a sociological ‘*corpus mennonitarium*’ in addition to the *corpus christi* is perhaps the heart of the problem.”⁷

The impact of the discussions were suggested in several post-Amsterdam

4 John Howard Yoder, “The Anabaptist Dissent: The Logic of the Place of the Disciple in Society,” *Concern* 1, June 1954, p. 46

5 *Ibid.*, pp 58-61. The quote is on page 61

6 A copy is in the Guy F Hershberger papers, Box 16, folder 2, Archives of the Mennonite Church (hereafter AMC), Goshen, Indiana.

7 “Summary of Conference—The Decline of the West—Amsterdam, The Netherlands, April 1952,” John Howard Yoder papers (hereafter JHY papers), Box 11, AMC.

letters to fellow participants. Paul Peachey wrote his colleagues that “from all appearances Amsterdam succeeded in jolting us out of some of our complacency.”⁸ Irvin Horst’s letter was more poignant. Amsterdam had not been just another conference. Certain dispositions became clear: “(1) that the bright child of neo-anabaptism is not adequate—is impotent to make new anabaptists; . . . (2) neo-anabaptism is chiefly academic, an interesting subject to build libraries, journals, lectures around—but not to personally adopt in our daily lives.” Musing about several Mennonite church members who earlier realized this, he continued “there seems to be a certain inevitability about this that is extremely disconcerting to me Maybe after all, there isn’t much point in being absolutely and radically biblical to the extent of creating a sect, but rather remain in the catholic church (or established Protestantism) and exert an influence there, for as sure as you go out on a sect-tangent it will peter out in a few years and then maybe you are in some way responsible for all the Pharisees that are bound to hang on to the dead ideas There is a danger that we ourselves remain purely ‘academic’ in our approach to these things. Are we willing to face the practical consequences of the anabaptist position in modern times?”⁹

It would be easy to suggest that the critique of the Mennonite world and the ensuing conflict that emerged between these seven and the established leaders of the Mennonite church was no more than the normal generational conflict. John Yoder, very early in the dialogue with established leaders, invoked that possibility. In the summer of 1954 he reminded John C. Wenger and Harold Bender of the generational crisis that developed between the young men following WWI (many of whom also served in European reconstruction work) and the leaders of the church in the troubled 1920s. But if in the previous conflict the youths took the low road (more liberal viewpoints as Yoder described it) the present conflict was one which moved in “an inverse direction.” This time the youthful protesters were the conservatives and the older generation were the liberals. The youth were going to defend an historic Anabaptism against the Protestant compromisers. Much of what had transpired between 1925 and 1950 under the name of “orthodox Mennonitism” was in reality “protestant orthodoxy with nonresistance and nonconformity appended.” The letter to Bender had all of the earmarks of the sons doing battle with the fathers. Yoder wrote: “What has happened to me is that in the process of growing up I have put together an interest in anabaptism, which you gave me, an MCC experience to which you were instrumental in assigning me, and theological study to which you directed me, to come out with what is a more logical fruition of your own convictions than you yourself realize.”¹⁰

The most trenchant of the generational interpretations came in Yoder’s post-

8 Paul Peachey to “Dear Colleagues,” August 1, 1952, JHY papers, Box 11, AMC.

9 Irvin Horst to “Comrades,” June 17, 1952, JHY papers, Box 11, AMC.

10 John Howard Yoder to John C. Wenger, July 10, 1954; John Howard Yoder to Harold S. Bender, July 2, 1954, JHY papers, Box 11, AMC.

Amsterdam paper, “The Cooking of the Anabaptist Goose,” and a subsequent “Addendum.” The addendum began as a lament that the adolescent difficulty in growing up was to discover a world of inconsistencies. Parents turn out to be fallible. Churches are caricatures of their theology. The problem was not only moral but also intellectual. The philosophical system, logic and presumably scientific basis for gaining understanding “don’t click.” The first response was a “sophomoric” one which espoused a counter-certainty to resolve the contradictions of the parental position. But further intellectual maturity “involves adjustment to the fact that no system, no logic, no ism, can give certainty or a system which explains everything, with no loose ends.”¹¹

What Amsterdam represented was the awareness that “Anabaptism” had been such a “sophomoric” construct. As such it provided explanations both of what was and what might be. Amsterdam revealed that the Anabaptism they had learned at Goshen, in CPS (Civilian Public Service) and in MCC was neither wholly biblical nor consonant with the current Mennonite church.¹²

II. A Mennonite response to modernity

Yet it would be truncating and even inaccurate to linger too long with a generational interpretation in seeking to understand the Concern movement and its impact on the Mennonite church and the larger Mennonite world. At stake was the consuming Mennonite intellectual enterprise of the 20th century. It was the question of what is an appropriate Mennonite response to modernity. The “Concern” response was one chapter in the search for an appropriate resting place.

While *Concern* is the name of 18 pamphlets that members of the Amsterdam group and friends published between 1954 and 1971, it refers as much to an intellectual movement as to a periodic publication. The first years (1952-1961) of the movement had a coherence and consistency that is not true of the second decade. During this decade it provided a significant critique to the early American Mennonite responses to modernity.

The Mennonite story from the 16th century to at least the mid-19th is best understood as an exile experience. Scattered from western Europe both east and west, Mennonites lived on the margins of various host societies. With the exception of the Dutch Mennonites, who fashioned a different relationship to the dominant culture, the story is one bounded by a high degree of cultural enslavement, political isolation, and spatial segregation. Distanced from various social systems by language, distinctive cultural characteristics, and distinctive religious commitments Mennonites became a people apart. So long as Western

11 “Addendum” (my name for this nameless paper), in Calvin Redekop papers, Box 1, folder 3, AMC

12 In this realization began the “Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality” interpretative disjuncture that became common to Concern understandings of Anabaptist-Mennonite history

history was itself largely fragmented, and so long as national economic, political, and cultural integration did not pull smaller and diverse population segments into the national culture, Mennonite geographical and cultural separateness was maintained. The intrusiveness of modernity, which began during the 19th-century and with accelerating speed pulled these marginal peoples into integrated and national societies, raised new issues for Mennonites. They had learned to carve out an ethos on the margins of society where patterns of social interaction with the dominant society could more easily be regulated. But this new order brought these relatively isolated peoples into greater contact.¹³

What modernity (defined here in terms of its intrusiveness and enveloping qualities) required was a revisiting of the central theme of Anabaptist/Mennonite history—the relationship of the church to the surrounding culture. The story of how American Mennonites fractured under these new pressures is well known. Some Mennonites moved towards societal engagement, others towards separation. The Old Orders reinforced mechanisms of control to insure their continued separation. They became some of the nation's most successful antimodernists. Those choosing modernity, being open to greater contact with American society, now had to fashion a way of living within its political, economic, cultural, and ideational systems while simultaneously retaining a distinctive tradition.

The history of those open to modernity is the story of searching for the middle ground between separation and integration, between withdrawal and engagement, between consolidation and dispersion. The strategy employed to find that middle ground was essentially threefold: the building of an institutional system; the elaboration of a distinctive ideological system; and the linking together of Mennonites in various ecumenical agencies and relationships. The Concern movement needs to be placed within the larger debate of the 1950s and 1960s as to the appropriateness of these responses to the issues posed by modernity.

Mennonite institution building began in the late 19th century. It flowered in the creation of church schools, mission societies and boards, publishing houses, church periodicals, Sunday schools, and Conference structures. The institutional system's influence was enormously accelerated by the requirements and opportunities of World War II. The Civilian Public Service experience introduced managerial systems and developed managerial talent that moved the church into a new mission and service activism under the direction of expanded institutional programs.

The 20th-century Anabaptist renaissance provided the conceptual categories for the ideational system. That recovery occurred in three phases: historical, sociological, and theological. These phases have differing starting points and were nuanced differently in the various Mennonite denominations. It is their forms in

13 Adapted from my "Mennonites in American Society: Modernity and the Persistence of Religious Community," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 63(July 1989): 232-233.

the Mennonite Church that provide the backdrop for Concern. The historical recovery began in the mid-twenties when Harold Bender went to Goshen College, established the Mennonite Historical Library, and began publication of *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. It undoubtedly reached its high moment with his 1943 "Anabaptist vision" address to the American Society of Church History.

The sociological phase began in the late 1930s with the J. Winfield Fretz rediscovery of the tradition of Mennonite mutual aid and the Mennonite church encounter with the growing labor union movement. It reached its zenith during the late 1940s and 1950s. The publication of *Mennonite Community* from 1947 to 1953 paralleled its most visible and active period. The origin of the theological phase may be linked to the seminar on Anabaptist theology that convened at Goshen College Biblical Seminary on May 14, 1949. The intent of the historical phase had always been to refashion the theology of the church. But both Bender and Robert Friedmann thought this meeting was the first attempt at more systematic theologizing about the implications of the 16th century for the contemporary church. Friedmann described it as "a remarkable situation: more than four hundred years after the beginning of the Anabaptist movement we have come together to find out what kind of theology Anabaptists and Mennonites actually have."¹⁴

The rediscovery of the past was of course a means of shaping the future. Yet the bipolar quality of the recovery immediately posed a central conundrum. It simultaneously moved Mennonites inward toward the creation of a "Christian social order" and outward in a mission and service activism. It brought Mennonites face to face with what J. Lawrence Burkholder in 1958 said was "bound to appear sometime in the lives of all idealistic, separatistic communities":¹⁵ that is, the dichotomy between the logic of history and theology which pointed towards separation and the logic of contemporary experience which pointed towards greater social participation.

The "Anabaptist vision" address, the crowning achievement of the recovery, amply pointed to the ambiguity. Bender began the address proclaiming that Anabaptism was "a programme for a new type of Christian society which the modern world, especially America and England, had been slowly realizing."¹⁶ As such the ecumenical and missionizing imperative was clear. He concluded by declaring that "the Christian may in no circumstance participate in any conduct in the existing social order which is contrary to the spirit and teaching of Christ He must consequently withdraw from the worldly system and create

14 Robert Friedmann, "Anabaptism and Protestantism," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 24(January 1950): 12.

15 J. Lawrence Burkholder, *The Problem of Social Responsibility From The Perspective Of The Mennonite Church* (Elkhart, Indiana: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1989), p. 3.

16 Harold S. Bender, "Anabaptist Vision," *Church History*, 13(1944): 3-4.

a Christian social order within the fellowship of the church brotherhood.”¹⁷

That conundrum between the appropriate witness that Anabaptism could make and the maintenance of the segregated social order was more artfully argued in the other 1944 landmark piece of Mennonite scholarship. It was Guy F. Hershberger’s *War, Peace and Nonresistance* that defined the relationship of this withdrawal vision to American civic renewal.

War, Peace and Nonresistance positioned historic Mennonite understandings as relevant for the larger ecumenical world and even for the nation at large. It was traditionally Mennonite in its argument that Christian ethics were for Christians only. Simultaneously it enlarged the consequential boundaries of nonresistance. Hershberger’s impact in part derived from incorporating into the Mennonite narrative the writings of people (T.S. Eliot, Adin Ballou, Gandhi, P.A. Sorokin, Arthur Morgan) who argued for the political relevance of nonresistant communities. Hershberger readily embraced their reading of the “curative” influence of nonresistance. “It is to bring healing to human society; to prevent its further decay through a consistent witness to the truth. This world needs the ministry of nonresistant Christians whose light, set on a hill, stands as a glowing witness to the way of truth and righteousness. A people who provide this witness are not parasites living at the expense of organized society. They are its greatest benefactors.”¹⁸

Hershberger, ever the American historian, knew the nation’s rhetoric of a dissident community “set upon a hill” beckoning people to emulate their moral order. In this “model theory of reform” community formation and withdrawal were ingredients of an active political witness. Hershberger’s subsequent primary efforts focused on the building of a segregated Christian social order.¹⁹

The January and July, 1939 issues of *Mennonite Quarterly Review* carried the initial articulation of the sociological phase of the recovery. J. Winfield Fretz, a graduate student at the University of Chicago, previewed his master’s and doctoral dissertations on the history of mutual aid. His search for a distinctive Mennonite social philosophy became a sustained preoccupation among some important Mennonite intellectuals.

The history of mutual aid was, as Bender suggested in the introduction to the two articles, “largely overlooked [but] one of the outstanding characteristics of Mennonitism throughout its history.”²⁰ Its roots were in the Anabaptist concern to imitate Christ, its rejection of legal and formal associations, the separation from

17 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

18 Guy F. Hershberger, *War, Peace and Nonresistance* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1944), p. 301.

19 For a discussion of these efforts see Theron Schlabach, “To Focus a Vision,” in John Richard Burkholder and Calvin Redekop, eds., *Kingdom, Cross and Community* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1978), pp. 15-64.

20 Harold S. Bender, “Editorial,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 13(January 1939): 4.

state dependence, and the insistence on the right of individual conscience. The result was the formation of fraternal associations instead of reliance on the constituted legal and formal associations. In this fraternal order the principles of love and brotherhood could replace an order of coercion and violence.²¹

If the distinctives of mutual aid were rooted in the Mennonite cultural system its possibilities, like Hershberger's nonresistant community, were not limited to Mennonite people. "It may be that Mennonite mutual aid may have significant implications for the development of a growing universal Christian community."²² In fact Fretz was critical that too often Mennonites had made "mutual aid and its other virtues an end in themselves instead of making them the means whereby the Christian circle is every extended."²³

While the theology of mutual aid was rooted in Anabaptist commitments which could be universalized, Fretz did suggest that its practice was tied to a particular form of social organization. Its beginnings were in the medieval village. The isolation of subsequent Mennonite village life nurtured the continuation of these cultural patterns. Now they were threatened by modernity. Urbanization posed a threat not only to mutual aid but to the continuation of a distinctive Mennonite cultural system. Fretz's research had already shown that of Mennonites migrating to Chicago only 10 percent remained affiliated with Mennonite congregations. The conclusion was clear: "The discovery of these facts . . . impressed upon me the disruptive influences that a city environment has on the Mennonite ideals and teachings and therefore, on the church itself. The urban soil is not the kind of soil in which the Mennonite church can grow. It is literally true that the city soil is too hard, stony and shallow for Mennonite ideals to take root."²⁴

The new social science scholarship entering into the church only reinforced these concerns. The first formal study of secularization closely linked its course in Mennonite life to urbanization. Karl Baehr's 1942 study of "Secularization among the Mennonites" examined Elkhart County. Part of the study identified the centrifugal and centripetal forces operating in the Mennonite universe. Foremost among the centripetal were the practice of mutual aid and community organization. The centrifugal included education, mixed marriages, fundamentalist Bible institutes, but pre-eminently urbanization. He thought it possible "to construct a secularization continuum with the urban civilization

21 J. Winfield Fretz, "Mutual Aid among the Mennonites," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 13(January 1939) 28-29.

22 J. Winfield Fretz, "Mennonite Mutual Aid: A Contribution to the Establishment of Christian Community" (Ph D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1941), p 8

23 *Ibid*, p. 243.

24 J. Winfield Fretz, "Mennonites and their Economic Problems," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 14(October 1940). 201.

occupying the secular pole”²⁵ Mennonites drifting to urban areas would “undoubtedly” secularize more rapidly than those remaining within the protective sheath of the more isolated village²⁶

Other Mennonite scholars drinking at this new social science scholarship were only too quick to concur. Melvin Gingerich in 1942 lamented that “our former rural security is disappearing, we are becoming secularized, our community life is breaking down, and our culture is losing its distinctive qualities.”²⁷

The historical recovery was bidirectional—moving the church inward towards the maintenance of Christian community and outward in mission activism. The sociological phase of the recovery was unidirectional. Whatever the generosity of its ideological claims, it was largely a withdrawal movement.

III. A challenge to institutional structures

The Concern movement was a response to and debate with the institutional building and ideological recovery of the first half of the 20th century. It is an important chapter in the Mennonite search for a place to stand. In a particular way it challenged the assumptions of the institutional renaissance and the sociological recovery. It also participated in the historical and theological phases of the recovery but more as an active definer than as critic to already established formulations.

The institutional critique The Concern challenge to the institutional structures surfaced at the Amsterdam meetings and in a variety of other 1952 expressions. Yoder’s post-Amsterdam reflections lamented that the church was run from the top down by a network of committees and budget controllers. Yoder, Horst, Peachey, and Redekop in early-August meetings with MCC officers observed the degree to which decisionmaking was centralized and pyramided. Redekop, predating modern advertising theory, argued that the organizational integration and skill of MCC had reached the point where it was easy to blur the distinction between what the church presumably wanted and what MCC officers thought strategic or desirable.²⁸

If the early unease had to do with institutional procedures and administrative styles it soon shifted to a critique framed in historical and theological terms. Writing to the “Amsterdam club” in February, 1954, John Howard Yoder saw the issues as the Mennonite perpetuation of the *corpus christianum*. There was a group of people in the Mennonite church who unwittingly thought the institution

25 Karl Baehr, “Secularization among the Mennonites” (B.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1942), p. iii.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

27 Melvin Gingerich, “Rural Life Problems and the Mennonites,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 16 (July 1942): 169.

28 See August 6, 1952 letters by Cal Redekop, Paul Peachey, and Irvin Horst to MCC. All are in Redekop papers, Box 1, folder 3, AMC.

building and its accompanying definitions of churchmanship were consonant with historic Mennonitism. Through Harold Bender they had received an historical tradition running back through Horsh to Twisck and Menno which accepted the Protestant reformers' way "of using means" to insure "group survival as an organization." While these younger disciples thought they were "reviving the original anabaptist vision," Yoder was persuaded the consequence would be "complete cultural assimilation."²⁹

The substantive critique of Mennonite institutionalism, implicit in the Amsterdam meeting and these epistolary exchanges, received a formal airing in the second *Concern* pamphlet. John Miller began the discussion with an interpretative survey of the church in the Old Testament. Three contexts (parallel to contemporary ones) and the Old Testament response suggested clues to how the church might structure itself today. The patriarchal period called for a denial of an exclusive history and the inclusion of all races and bloods to become the people of God; the period of statehood called for a recognition that the church was always more than a geographical reality, and the post-exilic period made clear that the remnant was more than "a well-regulated community of law."³⁰

Paul Peachey's contribution, "Spirit and Form in the Church of Christ," posited the historical variance between the church in its institutional, ethnic, structural, and visible forms versus the presence of the spirit embodied in *koinonia*. The Mennonite church with its "overarching denominational organization . . . uniformly binding cultural traits . . . conference structures" had clearly confused the forms with the spirit.³¹ It compromised not only the current program of the church but also tempted successive generations to presume that the spirit must conform to the received institutional structures. What was particularly galling were communities which deceived themselves by the rhetoric of liberation from the visible and ecclesiastical doctrines of the church and yet perpetuated their practice. Peachey concluded the indictment with the strong words of Samuel Shoemaker: ". . . by the time an informal movement has grown 'conservative' its usefulness is probably over. The most backward-looking, out-of-date thing in the world is the radical movement become respectable."³²

By the mid-fifties the efforts to alter the growing institutionalism were likened to Swiss Anabaptism seeking to break out of the stifling authority structures of Zwinglianism. In 1954 Yoder wrote that the distinctive Anabaptist position in the Reformation had not been doctrine, ethics, or church discipline. Those issues were only symptomatic of the fundamental disagreement. "The reformers were driven by the necessity . . . of managing a social ecclesiastical organization in the interests

29 John Howard Yoder to "Amsterdam Club," February 2, 1954, JHY papers, Box 11, AMC

30 John W. Miller, "The Church in the Old Testament," *Concern* 2, 1955, p. 1

31 Paul Peachey, "Spirit and Form in the Church of Christ," *Ibid*, p. 23

32 *Ibid*, p. 24 Emphasis is Peachey's.

of its survival.” Their theologizing logically followed from that commitment. The Anabaptists by insisting a priori on the necessity of being biblical were willing to “let the chips fall where they may as far as concerns of the survival of an organization, whether church or state.” The subsequent story of the Mennonites was that of losing “their evangelistic and ethical vision” whenever they adopted “‘new insights’ about non-biblical ways of running their church or social organization.”³³ Paul Peachey in 1957 embraced the same position by suggesting Mennonite Church opposition to their anti-institutional position as analogous to the Zwinglian-Lutheran reaction to Anabaptism. It was proof that “Anabaptism had indeed degenerated into a denomination.”³⁴

Use of the 16th-century analogy carried obvious and even ominous implications. If the Constantianization of Christianity and the subsequent Mennonitization of Anabaptism were similar then the question of an appropriate response grew more acute. The logic of the *corpus mennonitarium* indictment required actions similar to those taken by assaulters of the *corpus christianum*. Yet the Concern movement hardly contemplated such radical postures.

While articulating a sectarian theology, Concern rejected a sociological sectarianism. Rendering a prophetic witness and calling for a renewal of congregational life was different from calling for a schism. The intention to remain in the church and avoid such divisiveness was also consonant with their ecumenical dispositions.

Instead of withdrawal they embraced the house church as a means of structuring reform. The 1956 issue of *Concern* suggested house churches within established congregations as a place to recapture something of the fellowship, intimacy, empowerment, visibility, and purity of the New Testament ideal. The Concern movement’s more important contribution to the house church movement, however, came not in congregational forms but in two that emerged outside established congregations. Reba Place Fellowship in Chicago under the leadership of John Miller and a separated house church in Philadelphia under the leadership of Hans Wishler were both nurtured by Concern relationships and ideology. The Philadelphia group, which emerged in 1956, was composed of likeminded Quakers, Brethren, and Mennonites. Its ecumenical character was encouraging, while its separatist position was troubling. Its unaffiliated status with any of the parent denominations led Irvin Horst in 1957 to wonder whether it was sectarian. Horst at least was clear on his opposition to any separatist movement: “One thing I trust we shall not do . . . is form a sect . . . To go in this direction would negate what we have been saying to our parental churches as well as make noneffective our witness to the larger world.”³⁵

33 John Howard Yoder to Gerald Studer, February 2, 1954, JHY papers, Box 11, AMC.

34 Paul Peachey to Calvin Redekop, Irvin Horst, and John Howard Yoder, January 18, 1957. Made available by Redekop.

35 Irvin Horst in a round-robin letter of January 28, 1957. Made available by Calvin Redekop.

The degree to which life needed to be organized outside of the normal denominational structures to be faithful to their idealism not only divided the Concern generation from the leadership of the church but also came to divide them from each other. By 1961 the division was apparent between Reba Place as a model of the more intimate fellowship and the functioning of other members of the Concern group in churchly institutions. At a November meeting Swartzentruber noted “that when they came knocking at our doors they found no one at home. This is just another way of saying that the group as a whole does not have a good record of backing up in personal obedience the message proclaimed in general. Yet this is precisely the weakness we lament in Christendom at large.”³⁶

Paul Peachey framed the issue in even sharper terms. Writing to Al Meyer and Cal Redekop he noted that the “issue between Reba Place and the organs of Mennonitedom is at least to a point now an issue between John [Miller] and the rest of us.” Ever the dialectical sociologist, Peachey realized the need for radical action but also counselled hesitation so as not to jeopardize reform by moving prematurely. But Peachey was haunted about whether that was good social theory or psychological escape. To his friends he wrote: “Awareness of the dialectic is the way sophisticated souls always avoid action; they are so wise that they can see both sides to an issue and in the end do nothing. This is not the intention of the non Reba Place crowd, but then perhaps the guilty never intend to be guilty.”³⁷

The issues of church organization and structure that preoccupied the Concern generation during the fifties were common to various Mennonite groups during the decade. Changes in congregational and Conference structures and patterns brought about a widespread reassessment. The ideals regarding the nature and function of the church raised by the theological recovery of Anabaptism raised a host of questions. Caught between an ideology which understood the church in “brotherhood” terms and the drift into more Protestant forms created disjunctors that required numerous study conferences. The 1955 Mennonite Church study Conference on Church Organization and Administration sought for understanding of the biblical principles to guide the churchwide discussions on church organization. The 1955 believers’ church conference convened by General Conference Mennonites was a response to calls for greater “brotherhood” and discipline to achieve a more consistent Anabaptism. The Mennonite Brethren at their general conference in 1951 sought to combat the erosion of solidarity and the encroaching Protestantization by moving towards a more hierarchical system of authority.³⁸

36 Quoted by Paul Peachey in a letter to Al Meyer and Cal Redekop, November 21, 1961. Made available by Redekop.

37 *Ibid.*

38 See *Proceedings of the Study Conference on the Believers' Church* (Newton, Kansas: General Conference Mennonite Church, 1955); *Yearbook of the 45th General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America* (Winkler, Manitoba, 1951).

If the discussion was manifold the responses were more singular. While affirming the essential unity of clergy and laity, progressive Mennonite groups were moving towards the professional clergy; while affirming the principle of congregational autonomy, they continued building bureaucratic denominational systems; while fearing sectarianism they proceeded cautiously with ecumenical relationships. The drift was partly the inexorable logic of existing practices. Partly it was also due to the impoverished alternatives. As early as 1954 Peachey wrote to Yoder noting “the difficulty of translating ideas as we’ve espoused in terms of non-utopian alternatives to what we have.”³⁹ Mennonite anti-institutionalism of the 1950s—like Anabaptist restorationism of the 1530s—was easier to espouse than achieve.

The sociological critique: The sociological recovery which argued for withdrawal of Mennonites and the rebuilding of rural communities reached its zenith precisely at the moment when Mennonites were undergoing fundamental demographic shifts. The Mennonite census of 1951 revealed increasing vocational diversification, accelerating incomes, urban and suburban diffusion, and increasing enrolment in higher education. Mennonites were participating, albeit slower, in the great postwar cultural shifts.

A mission and service activism also came of age during the same immediate postwar period. Voluntary service, Pax service, mission expansion, and a decentralized alternative system in lieu of conscription all added to the number of people detaching themselves from the rural villages. If the sociological recovery counselled withdrawal the mission/service activism was thrusting people outward in increasing numbers.

The explicitly theological sectarianism that Yoder enunciated in describing Anabaptist social ethics, at least at first glance, might have made Concern an ally with the Mennonite cultural withdrawal movement. Their sociology in some significant ways paralleled the use of sectarianism as a theological construct. Yoder, from Amsterdam on, insisted that Mennonites, faithful to the Anabaptist position, needed to be a separated society maintaining a biblically-derived division of labor. There were two kinds of order and two kinds of action: the one organized for “redemptive living” and the one organized for “stability and order.”⁴⁰ Hershberger and Fretz would not have disagreed.

Yet the kind of withdrawal that Concern advocated was fundamentally different and contained one of the strongest critiques of the separatist sociological strategy. The Concern movement was pleading for theological rather than sociological boundaries. Their separatism, if theologically bounded, was sociologically open. The Mennonite community movement was not a “redemptive” incarnation of the Anabaptist vision but rather an abridgement.

39 Paul Peachey to John Howard Yoder, June 19, 1954, JHY papers, Box 11, AMC.

40 John Howard Yoder, “Addendum.”

Sixteenth-century Anabaptism sought to evangelize; the present Mennonite community was preoccupied with “holding young people within the church-dominated social unit until, partly by having been convinced and partly by inertia, they decide to stay.” The Christian school movement, seeking to prepare people for the “staple elements of the secular economy,” stood in “direct contrast to the anabaptist view of the ‘redemptive’ function in society as being on a categorically different level than of such enterprises.”⁴¹ Running through various exchanges were similar criticisms of the commercial agencies in the church (e.g., Mennonite Mutual Aid).

Part of the criticism came from Peachey’s reading of the occupational and class diversity and predominantly urban quality of the original Swiss Anabaptists. His 1954 article on the “Social Background and Social Philosophy of the Swiss Anabaptists, 1525-40” challenged the sectarian paradigms of Anabaptist history as advanced by Troeltsch and Köhler. Both suggested that Anabaptism from its inception harbored an ethic of cultural withdrawal. Peachey countered with the argument that the cultural negativism had been the result of forcible exclusion rather than voluntary withdrawal.⁴²

The cultural withdrawal of the 20th century was of a different order than the exclusionary withdrawal of the 16th century. Now it became a form of Constantinianization which set in place the structures of authority to diminish authentic and free religious choice. The result was all too often an unconscious passing on of the faith. While the New Testament and Anabaptism both described a first-generation vitality and did not proscribe the mechanisms for the passing of the faith from generation to generation the sociological withdrawal movement was using Reformed means to achieve Anabaptist substance.

The Concern position invited structural integration into the larger society but linked to ideological separatism. Structural pluralism created the Mennonite version of the *corpus christianum*. Ideological pluralism was necessary for biblical faithfulness. The kind of sociological pluralism that Concern did sanction was the Reba Place form. That form by being urban, nonbiological and entailing adult intentionality was different from the coercive form of community withdrawal.

The Concern quest for an appropriate Mennonite relationship to society, while influenced by the community withdrawal movement, was also intensified by the postwar Christian discussion of the nature of religious responsibility. That perennial discussion in which the church examines its relationship to surrounding social systems is augmented by particular historical situations. World War II, with its overwhelming display of the demonic, required a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between Christianity and society. J. Lawrence Burkholder was the

41 *Ibid.*

42 Paul Peachey, “Social Background and Social Philosophy of the Swiss Anabaptists, 1525-40,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 28(April 1954): 102-127.

most forceful advocate of Mennonite participation in this renewed search by Christendom to search for an appropriate doctrine of responsibility.⁴³ He was not alone. During the 1950s the *Concern* pamphlets and other forums in the Mennonite world also participated in this dialogue.

The first *Concern* pamphlet addressed this question with the papers Peachey and Yoder delivered at Amsterdam. Yoder readily identified his position as sectarian. The church's error was not establishment per se, but becoming the "guarantor of morale and cohesion for the social order." That role happened as easily through the delusive ambition to Christianize society as through formal establishment. What was at stake was not the structural linkages of the church but the domain of what it sought to regulate. The demise of the formal Constantinian system hardly dented the Christian maintenance of responsibility. But Yoder thought the position entailed a fatal compromise. By subordinating the love norm of ethics to realism which presumably understood the invincibility of evil, the responsibility advocates ended with a "justification of relativism and opportunism."⁴⁴ In effect the responsibility party, by reasoning the impossibility of the love ethic, "suspended or discarded" the ethics of Jesus. To avoid that suspension the Christian must recognize the sectarian limitation of its relevance.⁴⁵

This rather sharp delineation of a sectarian position and rejection of the "social responsibility" position did not, however, negate the recognition of the complexity of the problem or the presence of differing Mennonite voices. The publication of Gordon D. Kaufman's "Nonresistance and Responsibility" in *Concern* was evidence of an ideological generosity. Kaufman started from the same Mennonite ethic of nonviolence but searched for a strategy of engagement rather than withdrawal. He offered a strong critique of the position outlined by Yoder in the first issue of *Concern*. Yoder's dichotomy left Mennonites removed "from . . . the deepest problems of society."⁴⁶ That position would lead to a compromise equal to that encountered in the attempt to make it normative for the political order. A formula needed to be found by which love was not always required to "retreat from an evil situation, but always advances into it totally without regard for itself." If Mennonites had clearly seen that the love ethic was compromised by its attempt to dominate they had not seen that it was also compromised when disengaged.⁴⁷ To do less was to erect a "*dichotomy of condemnation*" in which Christians pridefully distanced themselves from the world. Kaufman called instead for a "*dichotomy of understanding*" which recognized the degree to which Mennonites

43 See particularly *The Problem of Social Responsibility From The Perspective of the Mennonite Church*. While published in 1989 it was written as a Th.D. dissertation at Princeton in 1958.

44 Yoder, "The Anabaptist Dissent," *Concern* 1, p. 58.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

46 Gordon D. Kaufman, "Nonresistance and Responsibility," *Concern* 6, November 1958, p. 6.

47 *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

were implicated in the social structures and needed to witness to the integrity of God's presence and unity in the world. Yoder's dichotomy of condemnation introduced an artificial separation that destroyed the "very unity of God."⁴⁸

The Concern discussions on the appropriate relationship of Mennonites to the world around them, like the discussions on church institutionalization, were not conclusive. The church/world discussion is always close to Mennonite theologizing. The subsequent dialogue would, however, increasingly use the rhetoric of engagement rather than the language of withdrawal. The writings of various members of the Concern group were important in that shift.⁴⁹

IV. Shaping the recovery of history and theology

The Concern movement was part of the larger search for a place to anchor the Mennonite tradition amidst the intrusiveness of modernity. Beyond critiquing the institutionalization and withdrawal tendencies in the Mennonite church, Concern played a constructive role in shaping the historical and theological recovery of the Anabaptist tradition. It helped Mennonites to find a place to stand between separation and integration, between withdrawal and engagement, between consolidation and dispersion.

The Concern critique of existing structures and formulations and its call for a disciplined social ethic gained a strong hearing with the generation coming of age in the 1960s. Their utopic reading of the Anabaptist story was congruent with the aspirations of American culture during the sixties.⁵⁰ The expectancy, perfectionism, and moral absolutism of the decade, combined with its quest for participatory structures was fertile ground for Concern ideas.

Mennonites, like others in American society during the sixties, were divided over these calls for renewal and transformation. Reclaiming the ideals of the 16th-century Anabaptists, like reclaiming the ideals of the American revolutionary tradition, created its own conflictual responses. The accumulated moral, cultural, and relational capital of congregational life hedged some Mennonites against the call for transformation. But significant elements in the church were drawn to the calls for change. The laments of idealistic Mennonites marginalized by the structures of authority found voice in the Concern position. The line from Concern to the Mennonite graduate student meetings of the 1960s was a direct one. Mennonite academic institutions, eventually home to various of the Concern

48 *Ibid*, p 28 Emphasis is Kaufman's

49 On this shift see J.R. Burkholder, "A Perspective on Mennonite Ethics," Burkholder and Redekop, eds., *Kingdom Cross and Community*, pp 151-170, John Richard Burkholder, *Mennonite Social Ethics Continuity and Change* (Akron, Pa Mennonite Central Committee, 1977)

50 For a recent utopic interpretation of the Anabaptist-Mennonite story by one of the Concern members see Calvin Redekop, *Mennonite Society* (Baltimore Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989)

group, became centers for the transmission of Concern issues.

The writings of the original seven members who met in Amsterdam found resonance in religious circles far beyond the Mennonite world. The Mennonite intellectual diaspora—those fellow travellers—were nourished by the formulations and incarnations of the Concern group. For these and others noted Concern mediated the sustenance to maintain hope for the transforming kingdom.