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**Cultural change.**

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## Chapter 4

# PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS

## CULTURAL CHANGE

*Delbert Wiens*

It was clear that those who assigned me this topic did not think that "culture" meant preferring Bach to Amy Grant. For a while I assumed it meant "alien" (as in "worldly") trends which influence our presumably non-cultural church for the worse. However, much that is best in us is the result of external influences, and much that troubles us is the natural result of the internal processes by which we have worked out the implications of what we have been. In fact, "culture" is the sum of the things we believe and do as members of a group, recognizing both that the spirits and processes of the group seem to take on a life of their own and that we also participate in the spirits and processes of many other smaller and larger groups. My task, therefore, is to suggest some general explanations for the spirits and processes which the Profile has described.

Such an explanation necessarily goes beyond any data which can be gathered. Like clues in a detective story, the data may fit several versions of what really happened. If the data are carefully

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gathered, however, "stray facts" will challenge inadequate accounts. Finally, the best explanation is expected to emerge. This explanation is a "story" which gives order and meaning to the "facts." All of us come to these data with preferred stories already at hand, and we tend to notice first the data which fit these. But when we notice data which disagree with what we expected, we are forced to come up with a more satisfactory story.

In fact, many plots have been worked out for other groups which provide themes for our own story. Insofar as we are American, the recent telling of the evolution of the American character by Robert Bellah, *et al.* (1985) in the best-seller *Habits of the Heart*, illuminates facets of our own character. Insofar as we are recent immigrants, the story of the stages of ethnic acculturation are extraordinarily apt.

We also have a traditional Mennonite Brethren story to explain changes. That story described an ideal beginning from which we have periodically "backslidden." And revival was the "happy-ending-as-new-beginning" that was called for. That story was never explicitly invoked in the two extended discussions of the Profile data in which I participated. Apparently it is no longer credible. Those present agreed that a turn has become necessary, and all would insist that we must build upon what we have been and done. Though all pray for repentance and fresh spiritual power, none of us, I think, could consistently think of such a revival as a return. Our future will fulfill our past only by significantly differing from it.

### *Themes for the Larger Story*

*1. The strengths and disciplines which have been fostered by an earlier, more "tribal," peoplehood has enabled present Mennonite Brethren to move "out" of our ethnic enclaves and "up" in the larger society. This has happened whether or not we have moved far from our birthplaces.*

The rate of demographic change was shocking. In a mere ten years we have become significantly more urban and more educated. The rate of occupational upgrading was even more striking. There were also some surprises. For example, town (but not rural) Mennonite Brethren decreased. If the data are representative (as they almost surely are except that churches begun after 1972 were not included in the survey), we had 50 percent more farmers in 1982 than in 1972 (from 12 percent to 18 percent). We were also older. In 1972 one-third of us were over 50; in 1982 nearly half had reached that mark, and half as

many as in 1972 were under 20. Interestingly, we were not more mobile.

2. *In addition to upward mobility, many whom we could least afford to lose have moved "out" of Mennonite Brethren churches.*

Equally striking was the demographic change that did not happen. It seems that the "baby boom" did nothing for us. The number of members between 20-39 years of age was the same as ten years earlier. Apparently we lost a very large percentage of that significantly more numerous post-World War II generation (assuming that Mennonite Brethren participated in that "boom"). Are we continuing to lose youth at an increased rate? That loss is even more significant if it should turn out that we lost proportionately more of that generation who now should be among our leaders. According to the Kauffman-Harder data (1975:189), "fifty-six percent of all ministers and 45 percent of all leaders are in the middle years (30-49)." (These figures include all the four Mennonite groups surveyed, not only Mennonite Brethren.) Of all the pastors who filled out the 1982 survey, only 24 percent were under 45 years of age. May we assume that we now have a more passive middle-aged population than we have had in the past? Have we lost too many who would have been best able to help us to understand and to cope with modernity? If so, the loss of much of the "60's generation" may prove to have been devastating.

3. *Our increasing success in the larger world has not led to an indiscriminate "love of the world." Our increased sophistication may even be producing a selective disillusionment with larger social and political structures.*

The evidence for this statement is both slim and ambiguous. I note, however, that attitudes on most "Mennonite" items in the *discipleship*, *reconciliation*, and *church and state* scales have not changed significantly. There was not a general decline on items which point to historical distinctives. On the other hand, I did not see much evidence that we are more thoughtfully Mennonite and Anabaptist (except among the most educated). Therefore, the 6 percent decline of those who think it all right to bring even legitimate claims of property damage to court suggests decreased faith in the legal system (especially since 8 percent fewer of us think Jesus expects us to follow his example). I think that decreased faith in the economic system is testified to by the additional 9 percent who no longer believe that lack of discipline fully accounts for an individual's poverty. Even the slight decline

of those who think we should actively promote peace may be due to loss of faith that the system can be budged in that way. And if 4 percent more are willing to swear oaths (what does an oath really mean in a secular setting?), an additional 4 percent (itself a 25 percent rise from 16 to 20 percent) now think that church schools should not accept state aid.

I am arguing that increased mastery of "the world" has led to selective criticism of it. Some of these (and other) data could instead be interpreted as an uncomprehending fear of the world and an increased defensiveness. Or do these possibilities apply to different groups of us? For different reasons, both the most — and least — successful of us could be increasingly critical of the larger culture.

*4. Accompanying the move from "tribalism" to sophistication is an increased individualism. Each person now must make moral and social and political discriminations which were once made, in larger part, by the group. In other words, we are moving from "ethos" to "ethics."*

On some moral matters (especially pertaining to interpersonal sex and the family), we have become more strict. On other "sins," judgment is varied. There does not appear to be a moral "domino effect." Of course, until we know why people now judge that formerly taboo activities are not "always wrong," we cannot prove that these persons are actually now more ethical. It is my hunch that fewer members now drink or dance (etc.) out of deliberate rebellion against our taboos. If more members than before occasionally drink alcoholic beverages or participate in social dancing, they are likely doing so because they are deciding that these are sometimes appropriate. Whether their conclusions are right or wrong, their mode of reasoning would be ethical. In both 1972 and 1982, 54 percent agreed that we should take no part in war (45 percent, down from 48 percent, would choose alternative service if drafted; but this does not account for those who might refuse even to register). However, similar numbers do not prove that there is no change. In fact, if fewer of us automatically accede to nonresistance out of unthinking acceptance of it as our Mennonite "thing" (as our ethos), then it would be true that unchanged numbers point to an actual increase in authentic non resistance.

*5. At the same time, our relation to God appears to become more individual, more spontaneous, and more comfortable.*

Bible study and prayer was shifting to less ritualized forms. Frequent, and spontaneous, requests for strength and guidance

were marginally higher; set prayers and devotions have declined. A number of other changes indicate greater comfortableness in members' relationship to God.

*6. There is increased appreciation for the tangible, local congregation. However, the denomination is becoming less important.*

More people joined small support groups (they may be called Bible study groups; but, since Bible knowledge decreased, that was not likely their real function). The local congregation was increasingly cherished. By every measure, except Sunday school, church members were increasingly active and happy in their own congregations. At the same time there was more diversity within our denomination and less identification with it (is it generally true of larger social structures?). Except for missions and relief, which just held their own, almost all other denominational causes found fewer people who thought they deserved more funds. Support for local churches and local Christian schools edged up as did our willingness to share in the ministry of the local group.

*7. On the other hand, the congregation is more fragile and demands less of its members. It is a more "contractual" and a less "organic" form of association.*

Members join a congregation for fellowship and support. But, unlike more organic "tribal" or "ethnic" communities, it cannot insist on shaping all aspects of a member's life. There is a tacit "contract" regarding what the individual and the group owe to each other. Some aspects of our lives are not included in that contract and are not submitted to the group's direction. In general, political, economic (and some moral) disciplines are increasingly held to be outside the church's jurisdiction; they intrude upon what is sensed to belong to the sphere of the individual. Moreover, public discussion of these issues leads to controversies which upset the group's cohesiveness and therefore threaten its power to give spiritual comfort and emotional support. A very large, and increasing, group (89 percent) agreed that giving is a member's own business. Though more people appeared to give more (55 percent claim to tithe), 8 percent fewer (down to 46 percent) thought that churches should urge members to tithe. There was also low, and declining, support for the congregation to adopt political positions. Nor were its members to form sub-groups to do so. Yet there was high support for members as individuals to be active politically. It is especially "forbidden" for pastors to discuss such issues from the pulpit.

8. *Like the associational congregation, God seems friendlier and less demanding.*

Our older communalism claimed the right to shape all aspects of our lives. It was often less important to understand and assent to the rules than unquestioningly to obey them. Even gentle prophetic voices were sometimes stifled. And it was judgmental. That was the negative side to the profound sense of cohesion and meaning which it could also offer.

Its God also judged more harshly and demanded more (and offered more?). A significant number of respondents who were sure that they are saved (94 percent) and that Christ loves them (88 percent), did not feel personally close to God (57 percent) or feel guided by a spiritual life goal (55 percent) or sense having been chosen by God to be his instrument (51 percent). Between these figures are approximately 40 percent who do not fear God's frown despite their sense of distance from him. If God is losing his wrath, he might also be losing his holiness, and that might explain why fewer remember having been in a "holy place."

9. *Despite all these changes, our assent to traditional doctrines has not changed.*

I realize that my concentration on shifts in the data between 1972 and 1982 can be misleading. Increasing (or decreasing) support for an item does not prove that that item does (or doesn't) characterize us — at least, not yet. Yet I think that startling demographic shifts, changing (and more discriminating) attitudes and practices, and the increase of a qualitatively different way of defining our relationship to the church and, possibly, to God imply a changing world-view. I also assume that doctrines are the basis, or an expression, of a Christian world-view. Then why are we so unanimous, and so constant, in our creedal affirmations? There is little discernible change even in specific Anabaptist-Mennonite beliefs.

Is it possible that we really are as orthodox as we claim to be and that our attitudes and behaviors are becoming more congruent with our convictions? My hunch is, rather, that dogma is being treated as irrelevant to "real life," except, perhaps, as a way of identifying us with other conservative evangelicals and Mennonites. And so much energy is required by that life that little is left over to consider that one's actually evolving world-view may be discrepant with the traditional formulations to which it costs nothing to continue to assent. Fewer people than in 1972 think that funds for the seminary should be increased.

Interest in Sunday school moves down startlingly when seen against the rest of the associational scales. And if people are less interested in doctrine — and the places where the study of it should be pursued — then perhaps it is the sermon which accounts for the increased number who are “sometimes bored” in church. There have been other times in history when a gap developed between old beliefs and new attitudes — and when largely unquestioned, and increasingly irrelevant, beliefs “painlessly” disappeared, almost over-night.

### *Toward the Larger Story*

I trust I will be forgiven a personal note. Exactly twenty years ago this month, *The Christian Leader* published “New Wine-skins for Old Wine.” Two times the editor mentioned the “systems” I tried to analyze, and the first three words of my introduction were, “Sociologists point out.” A great part of the shock value of that essay was the realization of how much a “secular” analysis could explain of what had been thought to be “sacred” reality. Now we have been presented a wholly sociological instrument which has yielded data which has so far been discussed almost entirely with the aid of broadly anthropological “stories.”

Of course this is appropriate. One would expect it of a religion based on incarnation. Even theology is also “culture.” We must continue to learn from the hypothetical constructs developed in the social sciences. But after all the doubtful themes (such as those given above) have been sifted and organized into larger plots which help to explain what it has meant to be “die Mennoniten Bruedergemeinde,” we will be left with the main task yet to do.

What is the larger Biblical and Christian epic which should shape our own small story to become an authentic and representative part of the gospel of the present and coming kingdom of God? This good news is not something that we can simply recover from our own past, even though what we then received was genuinely good news. I have already denied the appropriateness of such a “revival.” We, and our larger worlds, are now much more complex. Only an appropriately differentiated teaching and ethic and practice will be able to answer the questions we bring with us. Only a larger understanding of the Christian way than we have yet been given will capture our willing assent, will give us power to withstand those spirits and processes which are destructive, and will offer hope to ourselves as well as to others.