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MENNONITE BRETHREN HIGHER EDUCATION: PERSPECTIVES AND PROPOSALS

John E. Toews*

The present shape of Mennonite Brethren education in the U.S. emerged out of the 1954 General Conference in Hillsboro, Kansas. That same year I entered Tabor College as a freshman. My initiation to the issues of Mennonite Brethren education were the Conference and Lando Hiebert's speech class where we debated the future of higher education in the Conference.

Since 1954 I have spent most of my life in Mennonite Brethren educational institutions. I have studied at Tabor, Mennonite Brethren Bible College and Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary. Subsequently I have taught at Pacific College, Tabor College, and now, at the Seminary. These years have been interspersed with periods of study at public universities and teaching/administration at Conrad Grebel College/University of Waterloo. What follows is a reflection of that 24 year history written in candor and forthrightness within a context of commitment and service to our schools.

PERSPECTIVES

The current concern to discern the future shape of Mennonite Brethren education in the U.S. is rooted in a sense of crisis. Our colleges appear to be in trouble. We are faced with growing deficits, dropping enrolment and excessive faculty turn-overs. Something seems wrong. What is the shape of that wrongness? I submit two suggestions regarding the nature of the current problems.

A Crisis of Vision

Mennonite Brethren higher education is experiencing a crisis of

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vision. The most fundamental issue is not money, nor even survival. It is rather a question of mission and significance.

Mennonite Brethren higher education suffers from a blurred vision, which is a function of at least two related factors. *The major factor contributing to the blurred vision is the lack of a self-conscious identity in the Mennonite Brethren Church.* The Mennonite Brethren Church is in quest of a theological and sociological identity. The roots of this identity search are imbedded in Mennonite Brethren history, which represents the confluence of three major and sometimes conflicting sociotheological movements in Reformation and modern church history—Anabaptism, Pietism and Fundamentalism.

This identity crisis has been intensified in recent times by the collapse of rural ethnic communities in the process of growing urbanization and professionalism, the absence of clearly discernible and authoritative church leaders, and a growing loss of historical consciousness in response to acculturation pressures. The press to bed down in middle American culture has led to a quest for theological anonymity in the hope that it will make possible rapid denominational growth. Our preoccupation to be American evangelicals has often had as its correlate the desire to reduce the clarity of Anabaptist-Mennonite identity. Indiscriminate courtship (in some cases even marriage) with every popular doctrine and movement has resulted in theological rootlessness and naivete.

How can the educational program of the church possess a clear and cohesive vision when its church constituency lacks precisely that clarity of identity which is a prerequisite to such a vision? Because Mennonite Brethren self-understanding is heterogeneous the visions for the educational program of the church are many and conflicting.

The issue is illustrated by the much discussed question at the colleges, "are the schools Mennonite Brethren or evangelical?" It took one of our colleges five years and at least seven drafts of a statement of institutional goals to reach some decision on this issue. And even then the final statement had to be imposed by the Board because the faculty was too divided to make that decision. Not insignificantly, successive drafts weakened the Mennonite Brethren identity component of the statement.

Such uncertainty and even conflict within our colleges is not surprising. It reflects uncertainty within the Mennonite Brethren church and its leadership about the relationship of Anabaptism/Mennonite Brethrenism and evangelicalism. Part of the problem is that most Mennonite Brethren believe that evangelicalism is a uniform and unified community of faith and practice. But evangelicalism is diverse. There are at least four kinds of evangelicalism (following only one of

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several typologies): reformed, spiritualist, pietist and anabaptist. Both Anabaptism and Mennonite Brethrenism have been historically evangelical and remain so today. To be Anabaptist-Mennonite is just one way to be evangelical with integrity and identity. But many of our church leaders, including our school men, insist on pitting one against the other. The result is lack of clarity about who we are and, therefore, a lack of vision about who we could and should become.

Mennonite Brethren must become self-conscious about the kind of evangelical identity we espouse. Do we opt for an evangelicalism consistent with our Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage or one in conflict with it? Until the church comes to some clarity about this issue, our schools will educate without a guiding vision.

A second factor blurring Mennonite Brethren educational vision is a lack of clarity about the relation of Christian liberal arts education to a churchly education. There are several bases for the Christian college in American culture. The first, known as the commonwealth college, was founded in Massachusetts during the seventeenth century for the purpose of perpetuating the Christian commonwealth and humanizing the world. The mission of this type of college was to “civilize the wilderness” for the state and “Christianize the civilization” for the church. Out of this initial vision there has emerged the secular university which opts for the first half of the original vision, “the culturation of the wilderness,” and the classical Christian college which strives to “Christianize the culture.”

Another type of Christian college may be called the “sectarian” or “church college”. It emerged out of a particular theological-historical consciousness of the people of God in contradistinction to the citizens of this world. The college founded by a Believers Church seeks to serve the church in the world. That means the college belongs to the church, not the state or Christian commonwealth. Furthermore, that means education focuses on transmitting the particular historical-theological consciousness and faith of the people of God. The task of the church college is to affirm the vision of the church, to refine it and to apply it to new settings and issues, and to proclaim and elucidate it for all generations of the church, especially the younger generation.

The “liberal arts tradition” or “the liberating arts” was important to both types of schools, but for different reasons. The Christian college affirmed the liberal arts out of a concern to integrate the liberal arts into a system of Christian thought, that is, to “Christianize the culture.” The Church college affirms the liberating arts discerningly as a means of preparation for service in the church and the world. It seeks no systematic integration, but rather the ordering of knowledge on the basis of an ideology of theology which gives identity to and nurtures a particular people, the people of God, and serves the mission of that people in the world.

The colleges of the Mennonite Brethren Church were founded as “church institutions” designed to focus the identity and mission of the church. In other words, the purpose of these schools was not to increase knowledge for knowledge sake (to civilize the wilderness), or to Christianize American culture. Rather, it was to maintain, clarify and transmit the identity of a specific group of God’s people, namely, the Mennonite Brethren. Tabor and Fresno Pacific Colleges were founded to educate “our people” for “our churches.”

The original mission of Tabor and Pacific was clear. But today the vision tends to be blurred because the Board of Education and the colleges are confused about the kind of schools our colleges should be. The problem is complicated further by our desire to survive and even to grow. Therefore, we have opened our doors to increasing numbers of non-Mennonite Brethren students, so that today both colleges have less than 50% Mennonite Brethren students (Tabor 46% and Pacific 27% for 1977-78).¹ When we could not attract qualified Mennonite Brethren faculty to our colleges for a variety of reasons, we began staffing with non-Mennonite Brethren (Tabor 50% and Pacific 6% for 1978-79).² When we thought we needed non-Mennonite Brethren money and support we began appointing non-Mennonite Brethren to our institutional boards. These subtle operational shifts, all made with seemingly good rationale at one time, have increased our sense of doubt about what our colleges should be. Therefore, we debate whether our schools should be Church colleges or Christian colleges on the model of Wheaton or Biola.

The confusion will continue until the Mennonite Brethren Church and the Board of Education make some fundamental decisions about the kind of higher education the church wishes to mandate and support.

A Crisis of Authority

The first thesis suggests the basic problem in Mennonite Brethren higher education is a crisis of vision. The second thesis anchors the vision crisis in a crisis of structure and authority. The formulation of a vision is the mission of designated and authoritative leaders. The higher education program of the Mennonite Brethren church currently suffers from a weakness of structure and authority which makes vision formation and implementation difficult. There are several dimensions to this problem.

1) A vision for Mennonite Brethren higher education born between 1954 (Hillsboro General Conference) and 1963 (Mountain Lake U.S. Area Conference) has dominated the thinking and planning of the Board of Education. That vision asserts that U.S. Mennonite Brethren are a people so unique in commitment to higher education

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and so endowed with personnel and material resources that they can operate two colleges with such excellence that they will attract a minimum of 500 students each. That was a bold vision in 1954. But it was questioned by many Mennonite Brethren and declared unrealistic by Board-employed consultants. The Board, however, believed it and pursued it with dedication and sacrifice, often at great personal costs to Board members.

That vision is no longer viable. We have not attracted 500 students at both schools simultaneously, and will not. We have not built a solid and respectable financial base for either school, and will not. The vision is not realistic in relation to student potential denominationally or nationally. The Mennonite Brethren student pool (students graduating from high school) alone will drop from 350 students in 1978 to 255 in 1985 and to 240 in 1989.³ The rapidly inflating cost of higher education will further erode the fiscal base of both colleges.

But the vision persists. Why has an alternative to the 1954-1963 vision not come from the Board or from the schools?

2) The Board of Education is structurally unrelated to the colleges and the constituency. Beyond appointing members of the institutional boards, the Board of Education does not relate directly to the colleges. It is thus a Board with few important tasks. It meets twice a year, once conjointly with the institutional boards to hear annual institutional reports, and once to fellowship and reflect. Both Board members and administrators have been known to miss Board meetings. They have considered the agenda to be insignificant.

The structural disengagement of the Board is a function of defining Conference higher education as a divided program instead of a unified one. Decision-making power rests with the institutional boards, appointed by the Board of Education, not the Board elected by the Conference. The disengagement of the Board of Education is seen most clearly in the selection of college presidents, who more than anyone else symbolize and embody the conference vision for education. The presidential search committees are appointed by the institutional boards and the presidents are selected by the institutional boards with only token representation from the Board of Education. The disengagement of the Board of Education from the institutional boards is so serious that it has been possible to have a person serve as chairman of the institutional board and not be a member of the Board of Education.

The Board of Education is equally disengaged from the supporting constituency. It reports to the Conference once every three years in a context which guarantees that the reporting process will be

superficial. In the interim between conferences contact with the churches has been by institutional representatives most concerned with their own institutions rather than by the Board of Education.

3) The consequence of a questionable vision (point 1) and structural disengagement (point 2) has been a loss of authority for the Board of Education. Thus, the Board has found it difficult to hold college personnel accountable for deficit spending, for development problems, for non-confidence among faculty and constituency, for programs incompatible with school objectives or based on inadequate funding.

4) The Board of Education is weakened by a representational problem at several levels. In constituting most conference boards we look for both professional and geographical balance. For example, for the Board of Reference and Counsel we look to our pastors and theologians; for the Boards of Christian Education and Evangelism we call on our leaders in Christian education and church planting; for the Board of Trustees we want people with business management experience and wisdom. But when we come to higher education our logic changes. We elect pastors, physicians and businessmen. The Board of Education does not have a single representative of higher education as a member. This stands in sharp contrast to the Seminary Board, where one-fourth of the members are educators, and the Canadian Board of Higher Education that operates the Mennonite Brethren Bible College, which has a long tradition of strong representation from the educational community.

On another level the Board faces a problem with unlimited terms of service. While the conference as a whole limits board membership to two terms, the Board of Education has been exempted from this policy. The results are mixed. On the one hand, the Board enjoys continuity of membership. But, on the other hand, it loses the objectivity, creativity and energy which larger doses of new membership bring to a board.

PROPOSALS

If the analysis of the past and present helps to illumine the crisis before us, then it also implies some necessary changes for the future. The proposals that follow outline alternatives to the current vision and structures of Mennonite Brethren higher education for the 1980's and 1990's.

A Focus on Mennonite Brethren Identity

The first proposal is that the agenda of the Mennonite Brethren higher educational program must be Mennonite Brethren peoplehood. The original statements of purpose of the schools indicate clearly that the colleges were founded by Mennonite Brethren Churches for

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Mennonite Brethren people. They were founded as church schools not Christian liberal arts colleges.

The vision and the mission of Mennonite Brethren higher education for the 1980's and 1990's must once again become Mennonite Brethren peoplehood, the socio-theological identity of the Mennonite Brethren Church in the world. That is, the schools must be primarily concerned with distinctive peoplehood.

This focal center must determine the shape of the educational program. It will mean that what and how we teach is determined by the church and its heritage, not by an accrediting agency's definition of liberal arts. The immediate implications of such an educational stance will be, first, the need for a faculty who understand themselves to be representatives of the Mennonite Brethren Church and who are so recognized by the church. Second, such a vision of Mennonite Brethren education will mean the liberation from much of what we now teach, resulting in significant economic savings. Our college curricula currently are shaped more by forces and communities outside the church, e.g., universities and accrediting associations, than by the church. A reshaping of the curricular programs in terms of peoplehood education will give them a new and creative look. Third, an educational program defined with reference to peoplehood will have to include the whole church in its vision, not just the 18-22 year old.

A Unified Program

The second proposal is that the educational program of the Mennonite Brethren Church must be unified. The unification of the current educational program will require a single board and a single administration. The Mennonite Brethren Church can have such a single and unified program only if the Board of Education elected by the Conference is the sole center of decision-making in relation to the educational program and is the sole body accountable to the churches.

One president and one dean should be administratively responsible to the Board for the vision and operation of the program of higher education. The task of the president would be vision formation, church relations and fund raising. The translation of the vision into curricular programs and personnel would be the task of a strong and centralized dean's office.

The advantages of such a unified and centralized educational program are many: 1) it would give the educational program unified vision and leadership; 2) it would make possible program specialization on the respective campuses, and thus eliminate the current duplication of most programs; 3) it would significantly reduce administrative costs. (Not only could administrative staff be unified but costly and unchristian competition between the schools be eliminated);

and 4) it would make possible the unification of the educational program on one campus if the Board of Education so recommends. The unification of the current two school program into one college will have to be the task of the Board and a centralized administration. An attempt to unify the two schools on the Conference floor would split the Conference because regional and institutional loyalties are too deep and emotional.

One Cluster College

The third proposal is that the current two-college program be reshaped into one cluster college. Many members of the Mennonite Brethren Church, myself included, have serious doubts that the Mennonite Brethren Church has the resources to operate even one good independent college. The U.S. Mennonite Brethren Conference is small, too small to have the intellectual, financial and technical capital to establish and maintain one reputable school on the highly competitive American educational scene over the long haul. Therefore, even the unification of the current two schools into one independent college is probably not realistic for the 1980's and 1990's.

Another option, and the one advocated in this paper, proposes that the Mennonite Brethren Church redefine its college program as a cluster program. A cluster college is a small college of 200-300 students affiliated (clustered) with a large university. The model for such a U.S. Mennonite Brethren college would be the Canadian Conference Mennonite Brethren Bible College associated with the University of Winnipeg. A maximum of 200-300 students is suggested not only because this tends to be the maximum size of cluster colleges but also so that a minimum of 50% of the student body would be Mennonite Brethren to maintain the Mennonite Brethren identity of the college.

A cluster college strategy is proposed for the following reasons: 1) it would make possible the operation of a genuinely church college with Mennonite Brethren vision and concerns. The other studies necessary for a university degree would be taken through the university. 2) Many more Mennonite Brethren students could attend the Mennonite Brethren college, which is important for the future identity and leadership of the church. Both Tabor and Pacific currently attract only 34% of the Mennonite Brethren pursuing post-secondary studies because these schools offer a limited range of majors and vocational choices. As a result of such clustering Mennonite Brethren students could attend the Mennonite Brethren college while gaining access to the full range of university education, including graduate studies. 2) It would be fiscally viable. The facilities and personnel necessary to operate one good cluster college are minimal compared to the funds required for even one good independent college.

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This proposal assumes that we will be able to resolve the problem of regionalism and institutional loyalties in the U.S. Mennonite Brethren Church which has dictated the two-college program to date. A study of the historical record will demonstrate that the reason for the current two-school model is regionalism. The Mennonite Brethren Church has over-extended itself educationally because it was easier to perpetuate the two schools against the best wisdom of leaders in the brotherhood and consultants from outside the church than face the tough question of where to locate one joint program. We must face this hard question head on now if we are to have a viable educational program beyond the mid 1980's.

The location question, however, will never be resolved in and of itself. The question of vision and mission must take priority over location. What kind of higher educational program does the Mennonite Brethren Church want? Only when there is consensus on this issue is the question of location relevant.

If a consensus can be attained on the vision question, the location question should be assigned to a group of independent consultants, preferably educational leaders in the larger Mennonite and evangelical communities who have nothing at stake in the decision. Such an independent body should be asked to recommend a location to the Board of Education on the basis of a series of criteria: e.g., 1) proximity to a public university that is interested in a Mennonite Brethren cluster college; 2) an urban context that is in close proximity to a large Mennonite Brethren constituency. The Board of Education should be responsible to implement the recommendation of the consultant group.

If the Mennonite Brethren Church cannot overcome the problem of regionalism and institutional loyalty, I then would recommend that the two schools be related to universities in Kansas and California and each operate as cluster colleges with a maximum of 150-200 students on each campus. Tabor would need to be moved to Wichita or Manhattan, preferably Wichita because of its proximity to a major block of Mennonite Brethren Churches. Fresno Pacific would need to be related more closely to California State University of Fresno on the model of the Mennonite Brethren Bible College. Both the capital expenditures and the operating costs of such a dual program would be very heavy though less than the current program. Such a strategy would recognize the strong regional and institutional loyalties of Tabor and Pacific.

One final caveat. Great care should be taken to insure that a cluster college model serve the entire Mennonite Brethren Church. The college/colleges should be structured to include a flow of 22-100 year old church members for continuing education, and the faculty

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members should be available for continuing education and other ministries in the churches.

NOTES

1 See Joel Wiebe, ed., "Study Commission, Board of Education, Interim Report," (February, 1978), p. 12a.

2 These statistics are based on the assumption that teachers at Church colleges should be representatives of the church sponsoring the college. Therefore, the criteria applied in arriving at this data was five years of active membership in the Mennonite Brethren Church prior to appointment as a faculty member at one of the colleges. Many of the faculty members of non-Mennonite Brethren background have joined the Mennonite Brethren Church since appointment to one of the schools. We welcome them as brothers and sisters in Christ. But such warm reception into the church cannot obscure the reality that they are hardly prepared to represent Mennonite Brethren faith and vision to students.

3 Wiebe, "Study Commission," p. 12a.