

## INTRODUCTION

Mennonites are people on the move. We have wandered around the world in search of a place to call home. The places of European-American Mennonites are many: Holland, Prussia, Russia, Germany, Canada, United States, Paraguay and Brazil. There are few pieces of land that stay in Mennonite hands more than two or three generations. We are aliens and strangers. Our kingdom is not of this world. But we are also pilgrims knowing where the kingdom is. We take something of our self-understanding from the transient quality of life. Yet we also grow weary of the journey.

The history of pilgrims is that of beginnings and endings. In the movings there is energy and exhilaration. There is also anxiety and fear. There is the determination to preserve the old ways and the equal desire to conform to the new places. Pilgrim peoples are suspended between two cultures: the one rejected and the one being adopted. That status paradoxically accounts for both their strength and vulnerability. The determination to maintain distinctive ways and understandings amidst changing circumstances is certainly part of Mennonite Brethren history. We have preserved even when the way stations were harsh.

But we have also been vulnerable to the many host societies of our history. We have mistaken other peoples traditions for our own. We have sometimes thought that Mennonite faith was contained in German culture or in American middle class lifestyles. Even pilgrims want to be like others. Differences that make a difference are costly. We have tired of the cost of rejection, of being on the move, of the inferiority feelings that dominant societies subtly impose on minority groups. We have wanted to be good Russians, good Americans, and good Canadians.

Accommodation and resistance are the twin themes of many ethno-religious group histories. Ours is no exception. We are a separate people and we are not. We are Americans

and Canadians and we are not. We are the people of Washington and Ottawa and we are also the people of Hillsboro and Winkler. We wear our Mennonitism proudly and we hide it quickly. We invest much in Mennonite anniversaries, celebrations, and heritage centers that remind us of our past and we rush headlong into mainstream Canadian and American protestant culture. We share a common past and are uncertain whether we will share the same future. We have a sense of history and we suffer from historical amnesia. We know we have a rich theological heritage yet we have not always nourished it. We are part of a larger pattern of religious life that in the past several decades, in both its church programs and forms of personal spirituality, has been cut loose from historical roots and traditions.

Loosing a sense of direction is easy for a people on the move. Our movement has not only been geographical. We are a people that in a little over a hundred years have traversed social and cultural distinctions, political and ideological affiliations, and economic class boundaries. We have become a people of many races, nationalities, and lands. We are now a global church with the European-North American branch a minority.

Mennonite theologies are many and reflect the same movement. We have long debated whether our origins were pietistic or anabaptistic. Our theological history is that of centrifugal forces propelling us in so many directions that it is sometimes difficult to find the center.

Pilgrims and strangers frequently need to sort out their location and direction. One form of that sorting process is the backward glance to gain perspective on the distance travelled. The Mennonite Brethren have a preoccupation in the 1970s with understanding their one hundred year old pilgrimage. Indicators of a renewed historical consciousness are the publications of the General Conference Board of Christian Literature, the creation of the General Conference Historical Commission and the emergence of archival and Mennonite Brethren study centers in Winnipeg,

Hillsboro, and Fresno. While the focus is on understanding the historical experience the dialogue is about the relationship between past and present.

The publication of John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, in 1975, is the singularly significant event of this historical renaissance. It is the first officially authorized history of the Mennonite Brethren written in the English language. While there have been numerous histories of the tradition, none other is as comprehensive or analytical as Toews. He is clearly the Dean of Mennonite Brethren history.

The Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies thought the publication of the book a significant occasion for further historical discussion and reflection. The essays of this book are the consequence. They were (with one exception) originally presented at the Symposium on Mennonite Brethren History held on the campus of the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in May of 1975. They were one way to publicly acknowledge the significance of John A. Toews' work and simultaneously extend the dialogue about Mennonite Brethren history.

The papers were either direct responses to John A. Toews or they used *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* as a starting point for analysis. Like the book they center on the Russian and North American Mennonite Brethren world. The essays in Section I are more direct responses to the Toews history. Both Frank Epp and Delbert Wiens are interested in the ways religious history can be conceptualized. They comment on the Toews way and offer alternative approaches. John B. Toews and C. J. Dyck break new ground in Mennonite historiography by their analysis of the Mennonite Brethren beginnings in Russia in 1860. The nature and inspiration for that beginning has long been of interest to Mennonite scholars. These essays by more clearly relating 1860 to other beginnings in Anabaptist history and to the Russian Mennonite world of the mid-nineteenth century considerably enhance our under-



standing of the denominations's origin.

Clarence Hiebert and J. B. Toews explore the relationship of Mennonite Brethren to other evangelical movements and denominational traditions, to the American environment, and the impact of these interrelationships on Mennonite theology and self-understanding. Notions of Mennonite exceptionality are certainly tested by these papers. Both show rather clearly the significant impact of other religious groups on a people known for their religious and cultural separation.

The last two essays juxtapose the Mennonite Brethren vision with present day Mennonite reality. Both authors point to the disjuncture between the vision and the reality, but both are also hopeful that the vision is appropriate for our times.

These essays point to the many sides of the Mennonite Brethren. They reveal theological, cultural, and political diversity. They point to the doubleness of Mennonite Brethren life: the faithful pilgrim and the accommodating stranger.

They also point to a transformation in Mennonite Brethren historical writing. They clearly move away from the dominant American Mennonite historiographic preoccupation with institutional, doctrinal, structural, and formal history to one that is culturally, sociologically, and ethnically oriented. They place the history of our people in the context of the larger cultural milieu. They contextualize Mennonite Brethren life. That contextualization may be troubling for it does suggest that even at the valued points of our experience and identity we do take cues, styles, and theologies from the social context. The tradition's commitment to biblicism, which is a recurring theme of these essays, has to be matched by an understanding of its moorings in culture. Gaining this cultural/historical perspective is critical for achieving a clearer self-understanding.

Mennonite Brethren history is moving from what has previously been called church history to something called

religious history. It moves from the confines of Mennonite institutions to the search for the Mennonite experience. It searches for the way Mennonite faith has diffused itself throughout Mennonite life and thought. It shifts the focus from church history to people history, from structures to peoplehood. It allows us to more clearly see the relationship of our religious experience to our cultural experience.

The publication of these essays would not have been possible without the assistance of several people. The *Christian Leader* kindly permitted the reprinting of the essay by John E. Toews. The essay included here is different from the one he presented at the Symposium. Phyllis Vanderhoof typed the manuscript and prepared it for printing. She did so with sureness and unfailing spirit. Wilfred Martens gave the essays the benefit of his good grammatical judgement. Doreen Ewert assisted in proof-reading.