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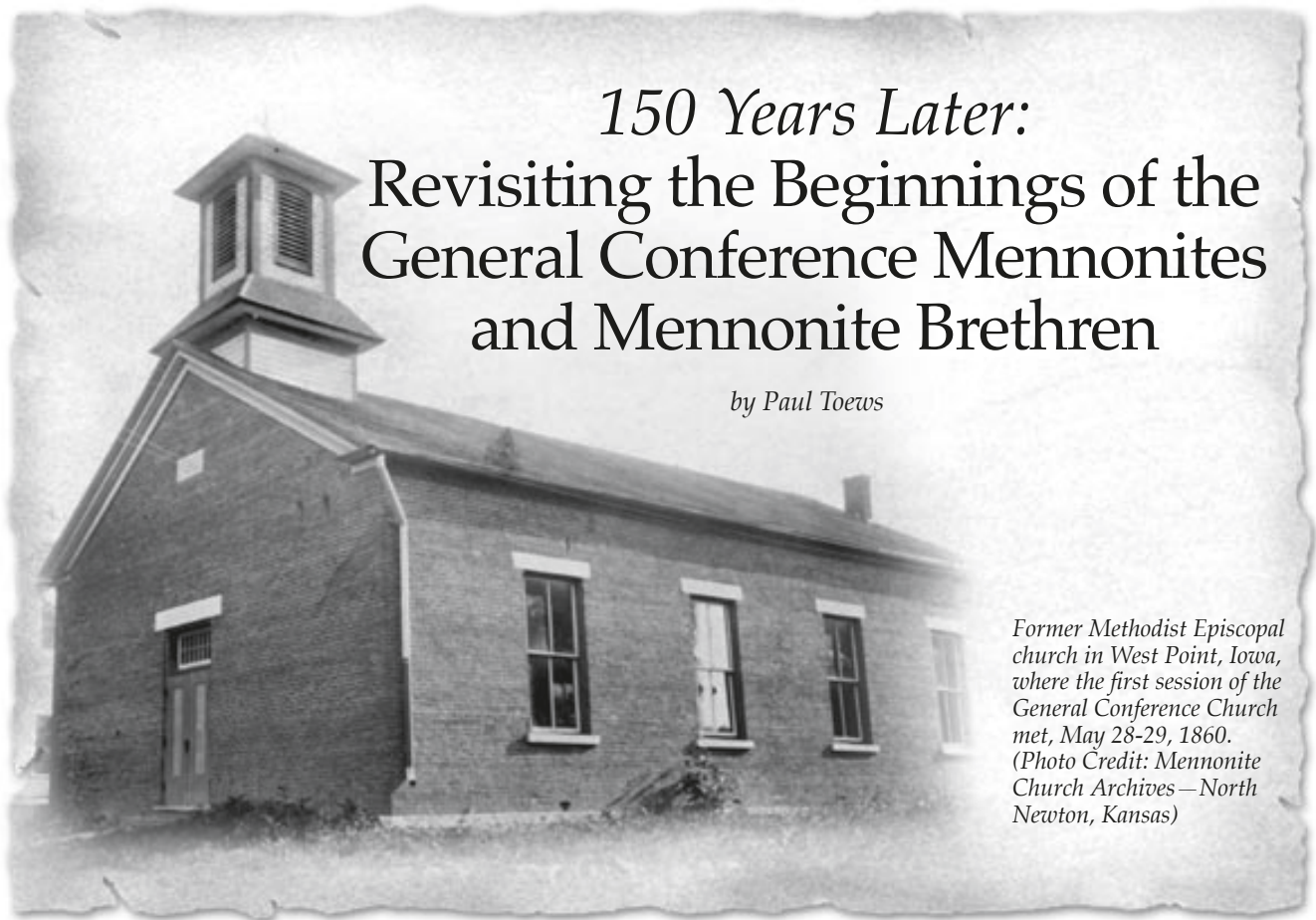
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150 Years Later: Revisiting the Beginnings of the General Conference Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren

by Paul Toews

Former Methodist Episcopal church in West Point, Iowa, where the first session of the General Conference Church met, May 28-29, 1860. (Photo Credit: Mennonite Church Archives—North Newton, Kansas)

The year 1860 marks the birth of both the Mennonite Brethren and the General Conference Mennonite Church. The General Conference Mennonites, now part of Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada, began in North America. The Mennonite Brethren trace their beginnings to what was then south Russia, now Ukraine. Their beginning stories have often been told. Comparative narratives have seldom emerged even though there is a long history of inter-relationship between the two groups. The sesquicentennial provides an opportunity to again examine similarities and differences in their birth stories.

The originating moments for religious groups often involve small numbers of people who make de-

isions that produce significant consequences. That was certainly so for both the Mennonite Brethren and General Conference Mennonites. On January 6, 1860, a gathering took place at the home of Isaac Koop in the village of Elisabethal, Molochna settlement, south Russia. At the end of the meeting eighteen "brethren" signed a document declaring their secession from the established Mennonite church of Russia. They all came from nearby small villages of the Molochna, the most populous Mennonite settlement (or colony) in Russia.

Five months later, on May 28, the second day of Pentecost, a small gathering met at the German Methodist Church in West Point, Iowa, also a village. Present were John Oberholtzer and Enos Loux from

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Pennsylvania, S. B. Bauman from Ontario, Joseph Schroeder from Polk City, Iowa, and members of the West Point and Franklin, Iowa, Mennonite congregations. Iowa was hardly at the center of the Mennonite population base in the country. Many more resided in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. They appointed a committee to bring back the next day a document that would be the basis for the formation of a new church *Vereinigung* (union).

The beginning of these two groups in the mid-nineteenth century is part of a much larger realignment among Russian and American Mennonites. In both countries Mennonites entered the nineteenth century as one unified body, albeit with internal strains, and exited the century divided

into multiple groupings that today we call denominations. In both continents the initial division happened in 1812 with the emergence of the Reformed Mennonites in the United States and the *Kleine Gemeinde* (now the Evangelical Mennonite Conference) in Russia. The divisions accelerated during mid-century in Russia and in the latter third of the century in the United States. Most of the groups emerged from schisms, thus continuing relationships were often uneasy. Schisms were so numerous in the nineteenth century Mennonite worlds of both Russia and America that some referred to them as the *Mennonitische Krankheit* (Mennonite sickness).

The movers behind the Mennonite Brethren origins were out of the Dutch/Polish/Russian

stream of the Mennonite world. Their biological and theological ancestry ran back through Poland/Prussia to the Northern European Anabaptist movement. Those gathered at West Point, Iowa, were out of the South-German and Swiss branch of the Mennonite story. Both groups were composed of recent immigrants. The Molochna settlement in South Russia was established in 1804 by immigrants from Prussia; many of those becoming Mennonite Brethren migrated to south Russia in the 1820s or later. They disproportionately settled in the southeast corner of the Molochna land tract.

The two Iowa congregations that hosted the meeting were from the approximately three thousand Mennonites that migrated from Alsace, Bavaria and the Palatinate to North America between the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars in 1815 and the beginning of the American Civil War in 1861. The West Point and Franklin Township congregations of southeastern Iowa were established in 1849 and 1852.

Thus, dislocation and adaptation to new environments were part of the recent experience of most persons attending both meetings. The immigrants who came to southeastern Molochna and southeastern Iowa were from places that previously sent Mennonites to south Russia and the United States. While they came from known communities the time gap between earlier settlers and their migration meant they carried differences that to outsiders might seem inconsequential, but in relatively tight communities could seem significant. Social differentiation following migration and adaptation is common to the modern world, even among similar population groups.

The regions that Mennonite immigrants of the nineteenth-century entered in Russia and Ameri-



The centennial meeting of the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church, held at the Reedley (California) Mennonite Brethren Church, 1960. (Photo Credit: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies)

ca initially permitted considerable spatial isolation from the larger host society. They both settled in frontier areas that nurtured innovation and provided geographical space for alternatives. As the century progressed they increasingly found themselves drawn into larger cultural orbits. The nineteenth-century is one of building national networks in both Russia and the United States. Sub-groups that previously were largely immune from broader contacts now had to make judgments as to what from the larger culture could be accepted and what should be held at bay. For some religious groups the adoption of new practices—revival campaigns, Sunday schools, mission societies, different hymnody, choirs and song festivals, mission festivals, or participation in inter-denominational movements like the Bible Society (English or American)—offered possibilities for revitalization of a routinized faith; for others those practices seemed profane.

During the nineteenth century there were numerous instances in the Mennonite family when what we might think of as traditionalists and progressives were arrayed

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against each other. In most cases these terms should be thought of as cultural, not theological. They are generally social descriptors. More than a half-century ago, Mennonite sociologist Calvin Redekop argued that we need to understand the differentiation primarily in sociological terms, not theological.¹ The realignments occurred over questions of practice, of finding “new wineskins for old wine.” Or to use the words of St.

Paul, we “have these treasures in earthen vessels” and sometimes different clay is required to house the treasure. Later analysts of the Mennonite confessional tradition have only confirmed this by noting that theological differences among Mennonite groups are

minimal and the core is virtually singular.² This multiplication of Mennonite subgroups during the century was not unique. Realignments in American Protestantism increased the number of groups within denominational families like Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist. Also in these traditions confessional loyalty was often not disturbed by cultural segregation.

There were also similar theological influences present at the

beginning of both movements, but they ran in different directions. The renewal movement in south Russia that spawned the Mennonite Brethren has long been understood as partly shaped by Baptist and pietist influences. Already in the nineteenth century, observers identified pietism as a factor influencing religious life in the Russian colonies and providing the backdrop for the emergence of the Mennonite Brethren.³ Cornelius J. Dyck and James Juhnke, prominent General Conference historians, note the two Iowa congregations also had been influenced by Baptists and pietists in Europe prior to their migration.⁴ Other Swiss-south German congregations in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Ontario, not present at the initial meeting in West Point, shared these pietistic interests and quickly joined the new conference.

Pietism, Anabaptism and Mennonitism share a long, somewhat convoluted and ironic history. Several Mennonite scholars have



The Mennonite Brethren church building, constructed in 1883 in Rükkenau, Russia (now Ukraine). It became the main center of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia. (Photo Credit: Alan Peters)

noted tensions.⁵ In south Russia the relationships became divisive, because pietism has multiple emphases. Pietism as a movement stressed various postures including personal religious experience, a warm personal piety, and an energized interest in mission and

of this schism directly affected a minority of the congregations that joined the General Conference, only those that became part of the East Pennsylvania District of Mennonites.

The pietism of those gathering in Elizabethal certainly included

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evangelization. Renewed interest in missions and evangelization among both the General Conference Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren were a result of pietism. A similar missional interest quickened in German Lutheranism, English Methodism, and a variety of American groups influenced by pietism.

The similarities of the Mennonite Brethren and General Conference beginnings, however striking, are probably less salient than the differences. The Mennonite Brethren movement was a schismatic one, a painful separation done with mutual enmity and conflict. The General Conference gathering in 1860 was an ecumenical event that sought to bring together a coalition of loosely or unaffiliated congregations. Their interest was more effective evangelization and the need for educational and publishing institutions to foster shared understandings and closer partnership in common work. Behind it was the painful schism of 1847 which had split the Mennonite church into “new” and “old” Mennonites. At the heart of that schism were issues of church practice: maintenance of stylized nonconformist dress, advisability of written minutes of meetings, adoption of written constitutions and the like. They were issues of cultural innovation or a stricter adherence to inherited ways. The bitterness

the missional interests that shaped the emerging General Conference movement. But it also stressed the language of inward renewal and the necessity of a personal religious experience. This language had been fortified by the migration of a group of Mennonites from Brenkenhofswalde, Brandenburg, Prussia to Gnadenfeld, south Russia and the coming of Eduard Wuest to Neuhoftunsthah, a village of German Lutheran colonists between Berdyansk and the Molochna cluster of villages. They brought to Mennonites a more exuberant and warm piety,

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an intense emphasis on personal conversion, and a call for demonstrative expression of release from sin and guilt and the enjoyment of God’s grace.

A number of the Brenkenhofswalde/Gnadenfeld community, including a Lange family that provided several generations of leadership for the community, and Wuest had roots in the pietist group from Wuerttemberg, Germany, who had separated from Lutheranism. Wuest, a charismatic and categorical preacher, had come to Christian faith through

a dramatic experience. For P. M. Friesen, author of *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1790-1910)*, Wuest was the chief purveyor of pietism to those who became Mennonite Brethren. He called him the “second reformer” following Menno Simons, who “built the house in which we live.”⁶

By the mid-nineteenth century, Russian Mennonite ministerial writings were full of notations about the moral lapses of their congregants and the need for greater vigilance. Some Russian Mennonites, infused by the new piety and faced with growing economic and social tensions, hitched their calls for moral reform to the new piety. Initially, the renewal movement took the form of home Bible study, prayer meetings and emotional exhortations. Supporters and opponents of the new practices soon divided into opposing camps. It became easy to describe the more restrained and long-codified piety of others as stagnant. The tensions spilled over into congregational relationships. At mid-century tensions flared over religious questions in both

settlements. The Kronsweide congregation (Chortitza colony) was rocked by controversy in 1853-54; the Gnadenfeld congregation (Molochna colony) from 1857 to 1860.

Some who were sympathetic to the same concerns as the Mennonite Brethren remained in the established church. What distinguished them from the Mennonite Brethren who left was, in part, a sectarian temperament. Bryan R. Wilson, a British sociologist, notes that sects frequently emerge “as a type of reassertion of commu-

nity values in which moral consensus—albeit sometimes in totalist mould—is re-established.”⁷ As “reassertion” they revitalize. As “totalist” they fracture. There is often a moralistic intensity to the sectarian style that, while corrective, lead to excess.

The two originating documents reflect the very different beginnings. The document of secession addressed to the elders of the Molochna Mennonite church began with a condemnation of existing conditions. “We fear the inevitable judgment of God, because the open godlessness and abomination are crying unto god in heaven.... It is sad to behold... when at the annual fairs our fellow-Mennonites, in the presence of their countrymen, live such satanic lives ... For these reasons we herewith are completely severing ourselves from the corrupt church, but we pray for our brethren that they might be saved.”⁸

The initial paragraph of the *Vereinung* resolution was invitational. “That all branches of the Mennonite denomination in North

“It was ... made clear that each individual who signed the document to be delivered to the church elders thereby placed his life in jeopardy.” (Jacob Bekker)

America, regardless of minor differences, should extend to each other the hand of fellowship.” It set the stage for others to join.⁹

The Mennonite Brethren beginnings occurred within a structure analogous to the European tradition of the state church and dissenters. It is a structure that has commonly been defined by the church-sect typology. The church is universal, comprehensive and inclusive; the sect is exclusive. The church has made an accommodation with prevailing social norms; the sect is usually offended by that accommodation. The church

“The two originating documents reflect the very different beginnings.”

is linked to existing civil authority and together they exercise power to maintain the monopoly of the church; the sect has only the power of persuasion. Commentators as far back as Robert Kreider in 1951 have noted how the Mennonite church in Russia functioned in ways reminiscent of the state churches of Europe.¹⁰ The civil leadership of the Mennonite colonies and parts of the religious establishment vigorously condemned the separation. However valid, the Mennonite Brethren charges could only be disavowed. Charges of apostasy never lie silent. So the Mennonite authorities sought to limit its spread through harassment, intimidation and even imprisonment. For C. J. Dyck, the response was analogous to the European state church reaction to the emergence of Anabaptism.¹¹

The signers of the document of secession understood that challenging the dominant church

posed dangers for them, the signers of the call for *Vereinigung* did so without the fear of reprisal. There would perhaps be recriminations among religious leaders, but there was certainly no chance that the dispute would become contested in civil institutions. By 1860 religious schism and religious pluralism were long established in the United States. The story of religion in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century could easily be organized around the profusion of new religious groups. Not so among the foreign colonists in

south Russia. The peculiar system of quasi-self-government granted to Mennonites and other foreign colonists, meant that the secessionists expected the Mennonite civil authorities to seek to suppress their move. Jacob Bekker, one of the signers of the secession document, wrote: “It was ... made clear that each individual who signed the document to be delivered to the church elders thereby placed his life in jeopardy. This venture ... could not be undertaken without expecting persecution, for the iniquity of the church would increase due to its corruption, making it ripe for the perpetration of such deeds.”¹²

The 1860 General Conference beginnings took place within the American structure that is best understood as a “denominational society.” This is a structure based on what Sidney Mead, a distinguished American historian, calls “purposive.” Denominations unite around common work. They have no connection to any kind of civil power, as in the church, nor are they sects in the sense of dissenting from an established church. Rather, they are collections of individuals (or congregations) united, as Mead says, “on the basis of common beliefs for the purpose of accomplishing tangible and defined objectives.”¹³ That is not to say that theology is unimportant, but what unites and energizes denominations is the common work that can best be done through combined efforts.

The denominational system works with a federated conception of truth, in which differing groups have insights that enhance our understanding of Christian faith. Denominations are organizational representations of our inability to fully comprehend and articulate

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the faith in singular terms. They are a protest against the inclusive claims of the universal church or the readiness of sectarians to accuse their opponents of apostasy.

The difference between the two birth moments has affected Mennonite relationships to this day. The 1847 schism behind the formation of the General Conference Mennonite Church in 1860 was formally closed by the coming together of the “New” and “Old” Mennonites in the formation of the Mennonite Church USA in 2002. Nothing comparable has occurred to heal the Russian schism of 1860. The 1870s migration of Mennonites from South Russia to Canada and the United States, the first of several migrations, came on the heels of the religiously divisive years. Of the roughly 18,000 Mennonites that came from Russia

and Prussia only about 1,200 were Mennonite Brethren and they all settled in the United States. They came with the 1860 scars and so distanced themselves from other Mennonites. Many of the other Russian Mennonite immigrants joined the newly formed General Conference association. Thus the General Conference, though formed in the United States, inherited the antagonism of events in Russia.

For Mennonites who remained in Russia those antagonisms were significantly bridged by 1906 when Mennonite Brethren and the Gross Gemeinde conferences met together for the first time. The difficulties Russian Mennonites faced in subsequent years—World War I, Sovietization, Collectivization, Dekulakization, anti-German hostility, and mass relocation—made

cooperation desirable. The Mennonite immigrant streams out of the Soviet Union to Canada and South America beginning in the 1920s established more cooperative relationships between General Conference and Mennonite Brethren than in the United States.

The centennial observances of both the Mennonite Brethren and General Conference in 1960 included formal apologies to each other for the misunderstandings of the past and calls for closer fellowship in the future. While contact has surely increased during the past fifty years, at the 150th anniversary the formal denominational relationships seem not much different than in 1960.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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