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Author(s): Henry J. Schmidt.

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Henry J. Schmidt

One Church's Journey in the Way of Peace

The Oklahoma family was shocked to learn of the US entry into World War I in April of 1917. There was to be a draft. The family had three sons draft age. Their grandparents had migrated to the United States to be free of military conscription. Now they faced the issue again. Newton Baker, Secretary of Defense, ordered all conscientious objectors to report to boot camp with the other draftees. He assured them that some arrangements would be worked out for the Mennonite young men. The family struggled with how to respond to the draft as Mennonite Brethren pacifists. One son decided to migrate to Canada to avoid the draft. The two other sons reported to boot camp as ordered. The issue in boot camp immediately became the level of participation in the war training machine. The one son refused to cooperate with the army—he would not salute the flag or officers, he would not wear army uniforms. This son was court marshalled and sent to federal prison in Leavenworth, Kansas. The third son cooperated with the military. Eleven months after the US entry into the war a system of farm furloughing was worked out for Mennonite men. Conscientious objectors were furloughed from the army to work on farms, including farms in their own communities, as long as it was not the family farm. The third son was furloughed to farm work in his home community.

The peace churches eventually found words to describe their understanding of the Bible's peace message. Starting with the Schleithem Confession of 1527, Anabaptists have worked with the Scriptures and with the situation of their times to include in their confessions of faith articles about the way of peace.

The previous chapter showed how the three largest Mennonite groups now hold statements of faith about peace which look remarkably similar. Yet each group has its own special way of thinking about peace and of acting out its convictions.

The Mennonite Brethren Church, which began in 1860 in southern Russia, is an Anabaptist church which has integrated strands of evangelicalism and pietism over the course of its development. This chapter will examine the approach to peace of this particular church, then will offer glimpses of the actual peace witness of the Mennonite Brethren in North America since 1917.

The Mennonite Brethren have always been "a people of the book." Their primary concern is to understand and obey the Bible. The Mennonite Brethren peace witness is anchored in a biblical commitment to follow Jesus' model of love and peacemaking, to declare the good news of forgiveness in Jesus Christ, and to give qualified allegiance to the state.

The fruit of a relationship with Jesus

The late Mennonite Brethren church leader John A. Toews wrote in 1975:

Christ bears the title 'the Prince of Peace' (Isaiah 9:6); the good news is called 'the gospel of peace' (Ephesians 6:15); God's servants are to be messengers of peace (Isaiah 52:7); and the kingdom of God is designated as the kingdom of peace and righteousness (Romans 14:17). According to these passages peacemaking is at the heart of the gospel. It should therefore be an integral part of the Christian message and ministry (Ephesians 2:17), for when a person is reconciled to God through the forgiveness of sin he becomes a peacemaker, radiating the peace with God he has received through faith in Christ.

The starting point for the Mennonite Brethren peace witness is the life and teaching of Jesus. Jesus told his disciples, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God" (Matthew 5:6). Mennonite Brethren believe that Christians must take seriously the meaning of Jesus' teaching that "as the father has sent me, even so send I you" (John 17:18). Therefore, Christians must obey Jesus' word about limitless love and forgiveness.

This starting point has three consequences. First, it means that limitless love and nonresistance are the fruit of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. That makes the Mennonite Brethren peace witness radically different from humanistic pacifism. Jesus as the foundation and model of limitless love raises the discussion of war above the level of escaping military pressures or of killing out of national self-interest. The issue is one of faithfulness and obedience to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Second, this starting point asks for an application of limitless love in all areas of life—not just in wartime. Christ's example and teaching are the basis for a new way of living. To follow Jesus means to live out his teaching in our homes, schools, churches, labor relations, race relations, professional relations and state relations. Wherever there is enmity or hatred, there Christians show love by word and deed.

Third, it provides Christians with a positive, active strategy for changing society. "Nonresistance" and "conscientious objection" are really not adequate descriptions of the thrust of the Bible, because they fail to capture the active nature of love as the new kingdom weapon. The term "active compassion" better suits the self-giving nature of Christ's love and the love he asks his followers to show.

The church models kingdom values

Mennonite Brethren understand Jesus' call to limitless love as a call to the whole church. They see the church as a fellowship of redeemed and separated people who visibly demonstrate redemptive love. They share the Anabaptist view that the church and state are separate realms which carry out different functions with different

standards.

Simply put, the church's main task is to live the values of God's kingdom and to invite others to join that kingdom. Central to kingdom living is a unique way of dealing with evil—suffering the consequences of evil rather than preventing it through force. The world, on the other hand, operates out of the nature of its "prince": with violence, hatred, fear, ill will, intimidation, war and bloodshed.

If the church is to display the reality of Christ's kingdom on earth by living his love ethic, this has an important impact on evangelism. Christians cannot participate in wars and take the lives of people who worship and follow Christ, or of others for whom he died.

Limits of the state

The third factor which has shaped the Mennonite Brethren peace witness is its understanding of the state. It can be summarized in two basic statements. First, the state was instituted by God but holds limited authority over the church. When the claims of government conflict with the claims of God "we must obey God rather than men."

Second, the Christian is called to be a responsible citizen in society. Paul reminds Christians to render to Caesar customs, taxes and honor. To honor those in authority means to take them seriously as the ministers of God. Mennonite Brethren confessions consistently have urged church members to pray for political leaders, to pay their taxes and "to promote justice, respect for human dignity and conditions of peace."

More recently Mennonite Brethren have been urged to remind government leaders of biblical standards concerning morality in matters of justice, war, divorce, abortion, corruption and discrimination.

THE PEACE WITNESS IN NORTH AMERICA

Mennonite Brethren together with other Mennonites first came to North America in 1874. They left Russia when the Russian government withdrew the privileges of religious freedom, military

exemption, self-administered German schools, and the village system of life which the Mennonite colonies had enjoyed for a century.

In North America the initial Mennonite Brethren immigrants duplicated their colony lifestyle, settling in small, rural communities that were separated from the world. Their thinking was characterized by an isolationist and survival mindset, and their peace witness was limited primarily to defining the role of the church in a new political environment.

Already in 1878 at their first unofficial convention in Henderson, Nebraska, Mennonite Brethren passed a resolution "that our members are not permitted to hold government office or take part at the polls." In 1890 they agreed to let members "vote quietly in elections," but asked them to refrain from participation and involvement in the conventions of political parties.

Requests for military exemption

The North American entry into World War I came as a shock to the isolated Mennonite Brethren communities. After forty years of peace they were suddenly conscripted into the war efforts of Canada and the U.S. Along with conscription came an American hatred for pacifists and for German culture. Once again Mennonites were forced to decide whether to negotiate for exemption or consider emigration. They chose to appeal to their governments for legislative privileges.

In 1917 a U.S. Mennonite committee with Mennonite Brethren representation traveled to Washington to request military exemption. Mennonite Brethren, together with other representatives from the Mennonites, Friends and Brethren, drafted a plan of action for alternative service again in 1940. In Canada, the government met with three Mennonite representatives in 1940 to negotiate alternatives to military service.

Because of the persistence of the peace group delegation, the Canadian government eventually accepted an alternative service program. And in the U.S., a bill passed in September 1940 opened the way for the Civilian Public Service program under the church's supervision.

Attempts to build credibility

Mennonites of all stripes banded together in 1920 to form the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). The occasion was the civil war and famine in Russia. A part of the incentive, however, was the need for Mennonites to build credibility in an American environment hostile to their pacifist position. What they needed, wrote P.C. Hiebert, "was an opportunity to disprove the charges of cowardice and selfishness made against the conscientious objector, and to express in a positive, concrete way the principle of peace and good will in which they believed."

Thousands of lives were spared as a result of the Mennonite rehabilitation and relief work in Russia. At the same time, Canadian Mennonites appealed to their government to relax a restrictive immigration law. The law was repealed in 1922. The Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization resettled some 18,000 Russian Mennonites in Canada during the 1920s.

Mennonite Brethren passed a resolution in 1919 condemning war. But in general, Mennonite Brethren protests to the two wars were cautious, partly because they were suspected of having German sympathies as a German-speaking immigrant group. Official conference resolutions and periodicals expressed strong appreciation for and loyalty to the government during and between the wars.

Most Mennonite Brethren men remained firmly committed to nonresistance during World War I. The response to World War II, however, was not uniform. Melvin Gingerich reports in *Service for Peace* that in the U.S. 39 percent served in alternative service, 34 percent registered as regular combatants, and 26 percent worked as non combatants.

Intensified Bible teaching

World War I and the struggle to gain legal status for conscientious objectors prompted the Mennonite Brethren to reaffirm their historic position against war and military service, and to elect a Committee on Nonresistance in 1919. During the inter-war years the committee

was responsible for government negotiations and biblical teaching. An annual Peace Sunday was introduced for the fall.

Many articles on the peace witness were published in Conference periodicals just after World War I and again just prior to World War II. Recurring themes in these writings were the biblical basis of nonresistance, the sinful nature of war, the warning that war was imminent, and the appeal to follow Jesus by choosing alternative service.

Through this process Mennonite Brethren began to distinguish between biblical nonresistance and the humanistic pacifist movement of the inter-war years. Mennonite Brethren strongly emphasized nonresistance as the lifestyle of the Christian, not simply a stance for war. They also saw that pacifism was empty without a personal commitment to Jesus Christ.

The commitment of Mennonite Brethren to proclaim the gospel has always taken precedence over other attempts to transform society. In 1924 they agreed that "our greatest mission consists in proclaiming the gospel of salvation, which leads to the renewing of the inner man, for without regeneration no true or lasting peace can be attained."

Mission and service

Mission and service belong together in the Anabaptist vision. The Mennonite Brethren peace witness has had a strong humanitarian dimension. Through the denominational Board of General Welfare and Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite famine victims in Russia and Mennonite immigrants from Russia to Canada and South America received massive assistance of food, clothing, jobs, agricultural equipment, money to purchase land and to pay travel debts. At first the recipients of this good will were primarily other Mennonites, but after World War II the focus broadened.

Also after World War II, Mennonite Brethren moved into missions more aggressively than at any time in their history. In the 15 years following the war recruits for missions, MCC and Christian service as well as giving to missions and relief increased 100 percent. By 1960 the mission church population outnumbered North American

members by 32,700 to 29,200.

The mission thrust was a positive strategy for changing the world in which Mennonite Brethren assumed that man's alienation from God can be resolved only by reconciliation through Christ. They placed primacy on gospel proclamation rather than on political and social change. And yet this expanded mission thrust was accompanied by a growing social conscience. The four-point program outlined by the Board of Missions included evangelism, church building, education and medical work.

Broadening application of nonresistance

As more and more North American Mennonite Brethren moved from rural to urban settings during the post-war years, they were forced to clarify and broaden their nonresistant position. A laxness in teaching nonresistance had crept into the church, as a 1948 denominational statement acknowledged:

The Committee of Reference and Counsel deeply regrets that we have brethren in our churches who do not live according to the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles in their personal lives but in times of war desire to be nonresistant. Such inconsistent Christian living darkens our testimony before the world and causes young people to look upon the principle of nonresistance which we confess in our churches, negatively and with disdain.

Several surveys from the 1950s indicate that many churches gave little attention to the teaching of nonresistance. In view of this, the church tried to reorientate a new generation in a stronger, more theologically-developed, nonresistance position. This education was done primarily through sermons, peace study conferences, conference resolutions and church publications.

A second factor which forced Mennonite Brethren to rework their position was new church/state issues which called for a broader application of nonresistant principles in society—among them law suits, labor-management conflicts, peacetime conscription, civil defense, payment of taxes and racism. In 1957 Mennonite Brethren

resolved to apply nonresistance beyond war. "We believe and teach," they agreed, "that it applies to every phase of life, to all relationships, personal, social, economic, political, national and international."

One new challenge which urban Mennonite Brethren faced was to live out their nonresistance in the arena of labor conflicts and union membership. As early as 1955 various voices within the church discouraged participation in labor unions. Mennonite Brethren agreed with organized labor on the concern for worker welfare and on "collective bargaining" as a means of improving worker conditions, but they disliked the strikes, violence and large-scale protests associated with the unions.

Politics as a new mission field

The 1960s and 1970s signaled a new era in the Mennonite Brethren peace witness. The church changed significantly in its view on participation in government. By 1980, for example, Mennonite Brethren had an acting governor of South Dakota, three federal legislators in Ottawa, one Canadian cabinet minister, and numerous state and provincial political candidates and elected representatives. Through MCC they had paid information monitors in Washington and Ottawa.

Both in 1966 and 1978 General Conference statements assumed greater involvement in social and political affairs. Missions became the reason for increased involvement. "The Christian church has been given a mandate to bring Christian concerns to bear in all situations," Mennonite Brethren agreed in 1978. "We have been instructed to bring the gospel to 'all the world' (Mark 16:15) and that directive allows for no exception in terms of either geography or society."

Challenged to live out limitless love

In recent years the growing complexity of church/state relations has called Mennonite Brethren to state their peace witness even more clearly. Mennonite Brethren peace statements in the past two

decades reflect two trends. The first is a concern to give a more thorough biblical, theological and practical rationale for the peace position.

The second trend is the shift from the term “nonresistance” to the term “limitless love.” Canadian churchman John Redekop called members in 1973 to reconnect Christian nonresistance with its source—the central Christian doctrine of love. “Having failed largely to root nonresistance in Christian love,” he suggested, “the major emphasis has gradually shifted to avoidance, although a moment’s reflection reminds us that the entire thrust of love, especially Christian love, is exactly the opposite.”

While this rediscovered emphasis on “limitless love” has broadened the scope and application of the peace witness to an ever-widening circle of relationships in everyday life, Mennonite Brethren have not always been able to agree on how love was to be expressed. For example, a 1972 study of Mennonite Brethren by Kauffman and Harder revealed that 83 percent of Mennonite Brethren felt that capital punishment should be retained.

Reaffirm peace witness for the 1980s

The US and Canadian Conferences as well as the General Conference have reaffirmed the peace witness for the 1980s. The US Conference in 1980 “affirmed our Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith and historic peace position,” and called for more systematic Bible teaching regarding peacemaking. The General Conference in 1981 also reaffirmed the Confession of Faith and expressed concern about churches and pastors who view the peace teaching as optional. “This we consider to be a serious violation of our peace position and the teachings of Jesus,” the Conference asserted. In 1984 the Canadian Conference not only made a similar statement but also went on record to support participation in peace marches when such participation is carefully processed with the local church. The same Conference also spoke out against nuclear war while calling for a more public peace witness and more teaching on peace issues in the churches.