

FELLOWSHIP IN THE WORD:  
THEOLOGICAL TRENDS WITHIN THE PACIFIC DISTRICT

Edmund Janzen

Theology never happens in a vacuum. Just as heredity and environment are the two key components to individual growth, so the context of a particular heritage of faith and the prevailing values of a culture are significant in giving shape to theology. What we believe to be true stems from what we were taught in church and home, and from what we have experienced in the world. Moreover, theology is never static. New and different experiences encountered by succeeding generations give rise to new challenges, and changes occur either in the belief systems or in the expression of those systems. Although it is difficult to document shifts in theological values it is assumed that any living organism, including the church, is aware of the fact that changes do occur. To be alive and to grow is to change, hopefully for the better.

How has the Pacific District Conference (PDC) of Mennonite Brethren (MB) Churches changed theologically since its inception in 1912? Decisions and resolutions of the PDC, conference themes and sermon topics, and questions raised by local churches are sources that help discern theological directions of the conference.

### **The Nature and Mission of the Church**

During the first decade of the PDC a large part of the “glue” that bonded MBs on the West Coast and caused them to promote home missions and church evangelism was their ethnic heritage. From settlements as far-ranging as Aberdeen, Idaho to Escondido in Southern California, MBs defined the church chiefly as a separate but nurturing community of the faith. Minutes of the early conventions and messages from leaders reflect that the primary task of the church was to nurture its members, and to evangelize and promote missions in the world. In 1913 the major discussions at the conference centered on the need for and duties of Sunday school teachers. It is also noteworthy that the custom of each local church was to request that a minister, before the days of the paid pastorate, visit the church for what was termed “evangelistic/spiritual renewal” meetings for two to six weeks annually. The concern focused on saving the children of the church families and also reaching some of the neighbors, *Die Deutschen* (the Germans). In the early years evangelism often was internal to the church, and relatively little emphasis was placed on reaching the community at large for Christ. Much of the conference preaching and teaching focused on the church as a spiritual entity in the world but not of it, and warnings against worldliness appeared frequently. At the 1922 PDC the mission committee recommended that “besides the saving of lost souls . . . the strengthening of the

spiritual life be stressed . . . in the face of loose living as it exists on the west coast." William J. Bestvater, minister from Shafter, preached rousing sermons at the 1932 PDC and the 1935 PDC sessions and defined the mission of the church as keeping faith alive, proclaiming Jesus as Savior, strengthening the believers, preaching the gospel to self-righteous sinners, and exercising authority and discipline over its members.

Virtually every convention from 1915 to the 1920s included a report of *Heidenmission* (heathen missions). Thus one of the early dominant themes in PDC history relates to viewing the church as a sending agency for missions, evangelism, and church planting. Yet little was taught or said about the physical world in which the church found itself. In 1947, A.A. Smith made an urgent plea to the PDC to begin evangelizing the families of migrant workers. Mention was made of their squalid living conditions, but no mention was made of working toward justice and improvement of those conditions.

Questions of theological significance surfaced early in the history of the conference. One of the recorded questions directed to the conference at the 1917 PDC was the matter of working on Sunday. It surfaced again in 1924 when the conference emphasized that the response to the "Sabbath-keeping Law" of the Ten Commandments was to keep the Lord's Day holy, but to do so based on love of God and not legalism. By 1921 the conference recognized the need to address questions of ongoing spiritual significance and appointed a Committee of Reference and Counsel, whose task it became to guide the faith and spiritual life of the new conference. In 1915 the Committee reported "they were not organized, and that no problems were presented, and so there was nothing to report." Either the agenda of this committee was too narrowly defined or the constituency forwarded no "spiritual" questions; in any case the Committee of Reference and Counsel was dissolved due to inactivity in 1925, and was not reinstated as a permanent committee until a decade later. On the whole, many of the concerns forwarded to this body were more of an ethical than doctrinal nature. For example, in 1937 one of the questions raised was whether church members might be allowed to manufacture and sell "strong drink" in their own businesses. The answer: "Participation in distributing vices such as alcohol/tobacco is not encouraged." In terms of identity, the PDC solidly aligned itself with the General Conference of MB Churches. As early as 1920, certain "difficult questions" were referred to that body.

The MB confession of faith was frequently appealed to as normative for PDC distinctives. In 1936 the confession of faith was mentioned as being taught as part of a Bible instruction course to the membership in Bakersfield. Neither the name "Mennonite Brethren", nor any of the articles of the MB confession of faith appear to have been challenged or debated formally until the decades of the 1970s and 1980s. Conference loyalty has been largely a given for most of the history of the PDC. In fact in 1953 it was the decision of the PDC that the names of all extension churches should contain the name "Mennonite Brethren". This decision was never rescinded, although raising the question of name suggests the beginning of a struggle to define conference identity. Moreover, two churches requesting ad-

mission to the PDC, South Shafter in 1955 and El Camino Bible in 1959, were recommended for full membership in the conference by the Board of Reference and Counsel (BORAC) based on their acceptance of the articles of the MB confession of faith. In 1978, to shore up the eroding concept of the New Testament Church as a covenant community, BORAC challenged the churches to exercise accountability, discernment, and discipline.

Another subtheme relating to the nature of the church is the issue of leadership. The discussion of leadership roles and models has been part of the district history since 1924, and has increased markedly in frequency and intensity during the last two decades against the backdrop of similar discussions in the larger evangelical community. In the early decades of mostly unpaid, untrained, and rural ministers, this issue rarely surfaced. In a sermon to the 1924 PDC, Isaak Wall of Reedley described a "God-Pleasing" leader as being "a shepherd and a mediator." In 1968 PDC stated that the educational requirements for ministerial ordination must include one of the following: attendance at the MB Biblical Seminary for one quarter, an evening course in MB history, or a correspondence course from the Seminary in the MB church. By the 1980s, in the context of much training, professionalization, and urban sophistication, church leadership and authority have become critical issues. Indeed, two consecutive conferences, 1982 and 1983, focused on leadership as their primary theme.

In 1986 BORAC reported that all new churches in the PDC started in the last decade had opted for an elder form of government, and seven previously existing churches also had changed to the elder format. Not yet resolved to this date in 1987 is whether women can serve as local church elders. The most recent address of the concept of what constitutes biblical leadership in the church came in 1986 when the BORAC asserted that in a biblical definition of leadership, authority must be corporate rather than individual, it must engage in mutual service and submission, and authority is confirmed by the way it is exercised by the leader.

Baptism, in terms of meaning and mode, has surfaced repeatedly as a theological issue in the district conference within the last three decades. While baptism was a central issue in early Anabaptist theology, it pertained to the baptism of adult believers and not so much to form. Since 1860 the MBs have emphasized immersion as the form that best symbolized death to the old life and resurrection with Christ to a new life. Because of specific situations within churches as well as General Conference resolutions that were binding on all MB churches, the matter of the mode of baptism became an issue within the PDC. In 1947 marriages with members of other denominations were permitted as long as the "other" partner was a Christian, baptized by immersion or willing to be and was willing to share his or her faith testimony. In 1963 the General Conference BORAC recommended that all MB conferences accept into full membership persons who requested to become members, but who had been baptized as adult believers by modes other than immersion. This recommendation was reconfirmed in 1972. The churches of the PDC affirmed that direction through their conformity in practice with the exception of the largest congregation, which chose not to align itself with the decision.

## **The person and work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit**

As early as 1927, in a conference message based on John 17:14, Rev. J.H. Richert of the South Reedley (later Dinuba) church, defined the importance of conversion in terms of a crisis event, stating that in this beginning of a life of faith there is: "no neutrality, only for or against. Those that come in contact with the Word will either doubt, despise, distort, or attack . . . or they will receive, honor, accept, and keep it." While relatively little was discussed about the person and atoning work of Jesus Christ, much sermonizing by successive conference leaders clearly indicates the conference as being Anabaptist/Evangelical in its Christological orientation. In 1934 C.N. Hiebert preached on the "Assignment of God's Children", focusing on the necessities of receiving Jesus as personal Savior, leading holy lives and being led by the Spirit. In its many pronouncements that Jesus Christ is Lord of the church, the district authenticated an orthodox stand in terms of the doctrine of Christology.

Surprisingly, eschatological themes (Christ's Second Coming) are rarely mentioned in PDC minutes. When references to the return of the Lord were made, they generally were in connection with increased corruption in the American culture, the persecution of the Mennonites in Russia, or depressed economic times.

Throughout the history of the conference little direct discussion or teaching was provided on the conference floor on the person and work of the Holy Spirit except as a reaction to the charismatic movement. In 1946 a minister within the district was asked by BORAC to explain his position on speaking in tongues as being a sign of spirit baptism, the matter having caused division within the local church. The minister chose to resign from the pastorate and subsequently withdrew from the PDC. Considering the importance of the Holy Spirit in the ongoing life of the early church and within early Anabaptism, it is indeed curious that this vital doctrine, especially as it relates to spiritual gifts and fruit bearing, has been so little accented within the conference. Moreover, missions and evangelism apart from the Holy Spirit is unthinkable in New Testament terms, yet the Holy Spirit is rarely mentioned by name in conference discussions on outreach, church planting and evangelism.

## **Discipleship/Lifestyle**

Issues relating to discipleship/lifestyle are many and complex. At the 1934 PDC representative discussions on lifestyle and ethical issues included a challenge to holy living, prayer, loving one another, giving, and following the Spirit. In 1954 a call for revival was sounded throughout the conference. Also in 1954 Waldo Wiebe of Shafter addressed the PDC on the subject of adultery. During the 1969 conference sessions MBs were called upon to be a source of light to our nation. In 1970 Edmund Janzen, professor of Bible at Pacific College, addressed the conference in a series of messages on materialism. During the same conference it was stated that "Word and Deed" must be one. In 1973 Elmer Martens, professor of Old Testament at the MB Biblical Seminary, issued a call to nonconformity to the

# ◆ Programm ◆

für die

25. Westliche Distrikt-Konferenz,  
abzuhalten vom 4. bis zum 7. November, 1934  
in der Mennoniten Brüder Kirche,  
Reedley, California

— Der erbauliche Teil des Programms —

Sonntag Morgen, 10 Uhr

Allgemeiner Gesang und Begrüßung.

Chorgesang.

Predigt von Rev. C. N. Siebert über das Thema: Mission,

1. Was haben wir bisher getan?
2. Was ist die Aussicht daß wir tun werden?
3. Was müssen wir tun?

Chorgesang.

Predigt von Rev. P. R. Lange, nach Joh 7, 37—39 über:  
das Thema: Der Strom der Gnade und ihre Segensträger.

Kollekte und Schluß der Vormittags-Sitzung.

Chorgesang.

Nachmittag, 2 Uhr

Gesang und Einleitung (in englischer Sprache).

Chorgesang.

Thanksgiving Sermon by Rev. J. D. Hofer.

Subject: Impelling Love Services, 2. Cor. 5, 14.

1. In Thanksgiving; 2. In Offerings
3. In Labor; 4. In Supplication.

Chorgesang.

Predigt von Rev. W. S. Westwater. Thema: Schreckensworte,  
Offb. Joh. 1, 7. Siehe Er kommt.

Chorgesang.

Kollekte.

Evening Services at 7 o'clock.

Song service (only 15 minutes).

Haven of Rest, program (one hour).

Evangelistic Sermon by Rev. P. R. Lange.

Subject: The Roll Call of the Heroes of Faith

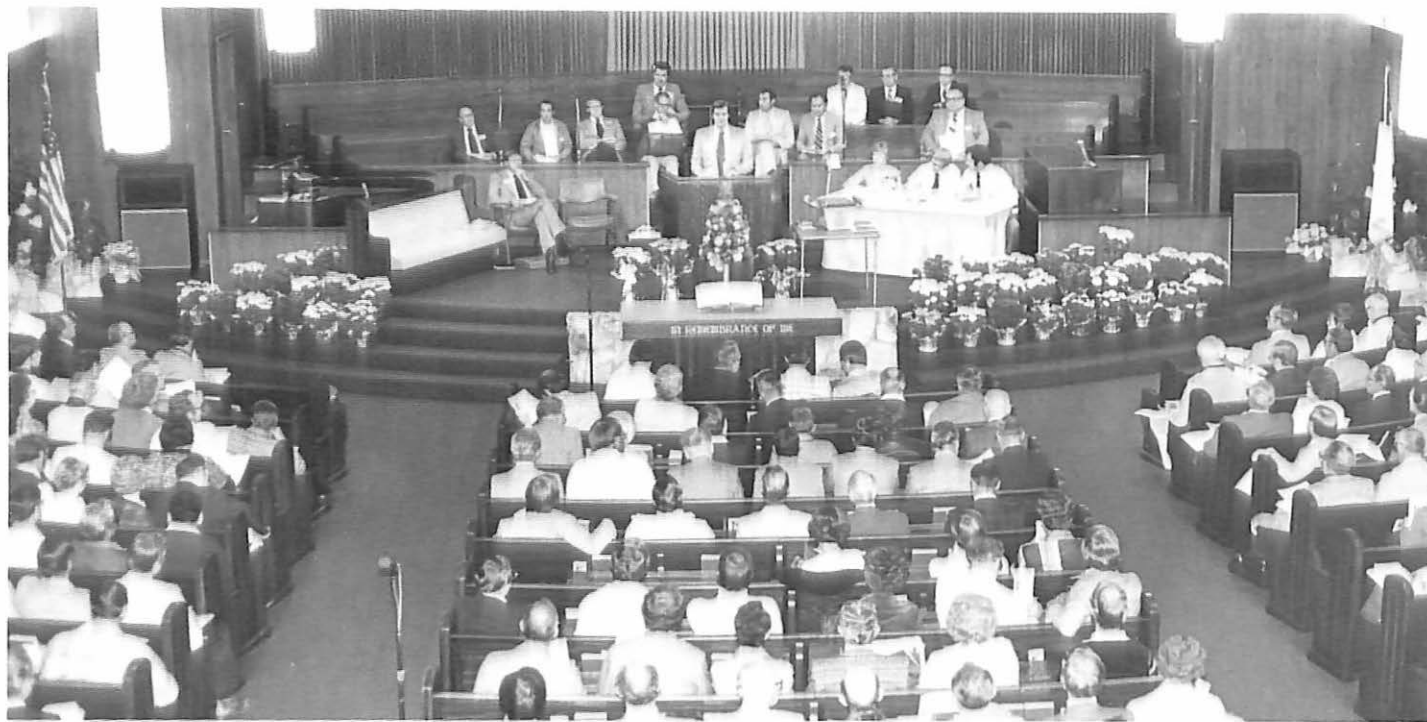
culture, and to forsake a life of ease. At the 1975 PDC Henry Janzen, pastor of the Reedley MB Church, discussed areas of nonfinancial stewardship including family, time, talents and possessions. In 1976 BORAC raised the issue of divorce and remarriage. Other issues given focus by BORAC included gambling, drinking, dancing, affluence, use of leisure time and television.

The family is of major importance to MBs, and messages relating to family have been given at sessions of the PDC throughout its seventy-five year history. At the 1914 and 1930 PDC discussions focused on the Christian family and the importance of raising godly children. At the 1970 PDC Edmund Janzen, in his message "Youth and the Church," called parents and other adults to be positive role models in living the Christ-life in the family and the world. At the 1973 PDC Elmer Martens brought awareness of opportunities to families facing societal pressures of fragmentation and disintegration. At the 1980 sessions David Augsburg, author and lecturer, addressed problem-solving within our Christian families.

Christian higher education was and is important to MBs, and the PDC has supported both Tabor College and Fresno Pacific College, formerly Pacific Bible Institute. The schools' beginnings were largely due to the felt need to train workers for the church and mission field, to provide an alternative to secular university education, and to teach MB distinctives to MB young people that they were not receiving at other evangelical Bible schools and colleges.

Annual minutes of the PDC reflect much discussion on peace and nonresistance. Already in 1918, at the end of World War I, a call was issued to support MB men in military camps by visiting them and by ministering to them. This predated any US government provision for conscientious objectors (COs). Again a similar call was directed to the churches of the conference in 1938. This time it was a charge to minister to the spiritual needs of those in the Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps located chiefly in California and in the Pacific Northwest. There appeared to be some vacillation on the part of conference leadership regarding what stand to take with reference to military conscription. In 1938 two words of counsel were spoken to the conference: on the one hand MB young men were encouraged to engage in noncombatant service if called upon to serve their country; on the other hand, they were called upon to be ready even to suffer for their convictions as COs. Indeed, in 1937 the statement was made by BORAC that "we regret that so little is known about the subject of nonresistance. We believe and talk about it, but few are able and willing to state a reason for their faith." Once again in 1969 BORAC issued a position statement affirming the historic MB peace position though little biblical evidence was offered in support.

In 1978 Jim Holm addressed the social implication of the Gospel in behalf of BORAC and called upon the MB churches to see themselves as active agents of justice and peace. In 1979 BORAC presented another study paper entitled "The Practical Application of Love and Non-resistance" in an attempt to provide a solid biblical basis for its necessary teaching in the churches, and in an attempt to suggest practical steps of implementing and "owning" this distinctive teaching of Jesus.



Board of Trustees on stage; Vern Heidebrecht, Moderator at 1978 PDC, Dinuba

In response to a resolution statement on nuclear disarmament prepared by BORAC the 1982 PDC delegation, by motion from the floor, voted not to accept or to discuss this matter because it was deemed "too political".

Peace and nonresistance, a theological distinctive of the Anabaptists and the MBs, remains a volatile issue within the PDC. There is relatively little active teaching and practical application by pastors and laity alike, and relative discomfort at the bold and clear statement of belief contained in the MB confession of faith. Beyond its application to the military question, individuals and churches are seldom stimulated to think creatively about what a commitment to a life of active peace-making may have in daily life in the midst of violence and strife in the home and in the market place.

Discussions at the PDC sessions involving contemporary issues surfaced as early as 1918 when membership in labor unions was discouraged. At the 1920 PDC relief work in Russia was strongly supported, and in 1942 aid to those in need in local communities was advocated. The 1978 PDC delegates discussed the needs of singles and the elderly. Eight years later the PDC Education Committee presented the book, *A Ministry to Singles*, edited by Ed Toews of Reedley. Ministry to homosexual persons was discussed at both the 1978 and 1980 conferences. At the 1980 PDC delegates voted that a study should be undertaken by BORAC to examine the separation of church and state doctrine. A compassionate ministry and attitude toward undocumented aliens was advocated at the PDC in 1986. In 1986, in keeping with the General Conference resolution on "Women in Ministry", Birgit Funck of the City Terrace church in Los Angeles was noted as the first woman licensed as an associate pastor in the PDC.

## Conclusion

At the outset of this essay the question posed was, "How has the PDC changed theologically since its inception in 1912?" An attempt to read the trends would show that the major change appears in how the conference views the nature of the church today; it appears to have shifted:

1. from a strong covenanting concept that stresses accountability to an equally strong view of autonomy that stresses individualism both within the local church and within the conference;
2. from a simple appeal to Scripture as a basis for action to an appeal to current church growth movements, materials and styles, and to activism threatening to replace a sense of abiding and being in Christ;
3. from separation, at times even social/religious isolation, to near total acculturation;
4. from untrained and multiple leadership forms to trained and professional leadership forms;
5. from preaching/praise centered conferences to more business oriented conferences;
6. from a nearly exclusive focus on mission to broad diversification in ministry;



7. from a survival mentality to a progressive mentality;
8. from a lack of social awareness to a willingness, in part, to address some social issues;
9. from limited resources in people and finances to major resources in trained people and significant wealth, yet with few "home-grown" pastors and church workers.

A second major trend relates to discipleship and how living today approximates the life of Jesus. Here the shift can be traced:

1. from a view of the sanctity of marriage and family life to a focus on how to minister redemptively to the fragmented and broken family;
2. from strong and well-defined positions on social evils and "worldliness" to a general enunciation of biblical principles for ethical living to be applied within the cultural value systems;
3. from endorsement and active teaching of the peace and nonresistance doctrine to selective reservation and general quiescence on the issue;
4. from a rural and village emphasis in ministry to an urban expression of the life and ministry of the church and its members.

The MB confession of faith continues to be viewed as the guide for matters of faith and life of the PDC. The current theological debate within the district appears to center on whether the confession of faith is to be viewed as descriptive or prescriptive, that is whether an individual church or member can consider any of the articles of faith to be optional and still be considered a member in good standing. In short, the people of the PDC are remarkably orthodox and evangelical doctrinally, but their lifestyle would not suggest the same conservatism. What has changed significantly, in the PDC as well as in the mainstream American church culture, is that theologically we prefer sameness to distinctiveness. In that regard, the PDC has in large measure opted, albeit more by accident than design, to forfeit its distinctives.

At the 1959 district conference Chairman H.H. Dick of Shafter challenged the delegates in a message entitled "The Uneasy Conscience of Our Brotherhood". The address may have been more prophetic than he realized at that time, as Dick singled out three areas in which MBs might well have an uneasy conscience:

1. with respect to devotion to the Anabaptist heritage, as it relates to Christ;
2. with respect to loyalty to the Brotherhood in stewardship and carrying out conference decisions and projects;
3. with respect to lack of Christian workers, citing growing materialism for "having lost sight of the multitudes, and the immediate need for the harvest".

The Chairman challenged the Conference at that time, to re-examine these basics and to yield to the Holy Spirit's leading. Now, in 1987, the Pacific District churches might do well to receive and respond to a similar challenge.

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