

Ethnicity and the Mennonite Brethren: Issues and Responses

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A. INTRODUCTION

This essay constitutes a sequel to A PEOPLE APART. (1) It will not repeat the detailed arguments and research findings presented in that volume. Rather, it aims to clarify the fundamental assumptions, to delineate the sequence of key questions even more carefully than the book does, to set forth some personal reflections arising from the book's reception, and to respond to some of the questions raised by readers and reviewers.

Several preliminary comments seem warranted. First, the general nature and scope of the research were set forth and subsequently extended by the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns, since renamed the Board of Faith and Life. That genesis explains why the investigation did not address the problems associated with the term "brethren".

Second, a review of the literature suggests that concerning the deepening dilemmas involving the complex faith-ethnicity relationship, the larger Mennonite community has not been particularly well served by its scholars, in particular the sociologists, historians, and theologians within whose academic purview such matters would naturally fall. More specifically, instead of substantive normative assessments by Mennonite sociologists and ethnologists, we seem to have a tradition of relative neglect and inattention. Most of the theologians and historians have not helped us much either in that regard. One finds some insights and passing acknowledgement of a logical and theological problem but no substantial, let alone rigorous, analysis. A path-breaking ethno-social analysis can be found in the notable and very recent dissertation by Miriam Warner. (2)

Maybe the Mennonite academics, simultaneously practitioners of Mennonitism in its faith-culture fusion, simply missed the trends. Perhaps intellectual distancing and scholarly detachment become difficult. We have, after all, become a comfortable component of the establishment fusion. Maybe some informed observers actually did perceive developing ethnic realities accurately but by rationalization and other means they may have convinced themselves that no problem existed. Maybe we have been so preoccupied with the identity questions that we have missed the growing and increasingly consequential ethnological-theological and ecclesiological quandary. Or could it be that because the theologically problematic trends developed gradually, we did not notice? Whatever the reasons, the increasingly aware and broadly struggling Mennonite constituency has not received the factual information, the conceptual clarification, the ethical reminders, or the reformational leadership to which it was entitled. In the main, Mennonite academics and other leaders have not come through in the area.

A final introductory comment must be the assertion that my gradual understanding, still deepening, of what Biblical Anabaptism really means,

has revolutionized my thinking about Mennonites in general, and Mennonite Brethren in particular, and has profoundly rearranged my priorities. The recapturing of authentic Anabaptism, the clarification of Anabaptism for a people who have partially lost their theological way, and the realization that time for action is rapidly running out, have for me become life-shaping realizations.

B. VITAL ASSUMPTIONS

The perspective presented in this essay rests on several important assumptions.

1. The church, if perceived correctly, must be seen primarily as a voluntary covenant community, not mainly as an ethnic community. Given certain kinds of social and historical developments, some congregations, especially in immigrant communities, may also function as ethnic units for a generation or two. For minorities segregated linguistically, such separation may last longer but it should not become normative. The Christian church has not been commissioned to be the bearer of ethnic values. The wine of the Gospel was specifically not poured into ethnic wineskins.

Those who make the case for alloyed faith must provide a Biblical justification or abandon their views. The onus is on them, not on those of us who take Romans 1:14; I Corinthians 9:19-23; and Philipians 3:4-11 as normative.

2. While change for its own sake has no value, the Gospel imperative requires all of us to be willing to accept change. The context must be one of sharing. Soul-destroying shifts must be avoided. Sharing, in turn, requires mutual respect, for without respect there can not be love. Respect and love extend to others but also include oneself. In that context we dare not deny who other people are any more than we should deny who we are. Other peoples also have Old Testaments with strong ethnic roots. We must also hear the stories of other people. They, too, have validity. Love and respect do not deny, they affirm. Therefore, when two or more ethnic groups meet in a congregation or a denomination on the level ground at Calvary, no group seeks to dominate, for informed saints realize that marginalization is a spiritual issue. Therefore, Mennonites, as members of an ethnic group, do not only bring their own cultural values to the assembly, but also respect and receive other ethnic origins as being of equal worth. Anabaptists, even more than some others, are motivated by their traditional theological beliefs to be sociologically inclusive in God's family.
3. We Mennonites are a people, in North America and in several other regions. We are essentially a historical, ethnoreligious people. But our ethnic peoplehood has ceased to be coterminous with the Anabaptist church, or our wing of it.
4. There is a vast theological difference between being excluded by outsiders, especially sociological outsiders, and excluding such outsiders. The latter has no theological basis.

5. An Anabaptist church or denomination does not require a uni-ethnic underpinning in order to function as a covenant community. If we believe otherwise, then we run counter to the entire account in the Acts of Apostles, whether dominated first by Peter or later by Paul. Indeed, if we hold to such a uni-ethnic view we have exegetical and confessional problems of fundamental gravity. The fact that for a variety of historical reasons virtually all Anabaptist groups have not achieved a multi-ethnic character does not alter the Biblical imperative.
6. Whether ethnic Mennonites in general, or ethnic Mennonite Brethren in particular, consciously review their ethnic-faith fusion or not, the status quo will not continue. It is no aberration that six of the seven congregations which joined the Canadian Mennonite Brethren conference on July 5, 1987, did not call themselves "Mennonite". The seventh was a Chinese congregation in Winnipeg. As a mission church it had no real choice. The writing on the wall stands bold and clear for all who choose to acknowledge it. The North American Mennonite Brethren conference, and several others, has reached a crucial juncture. By decision or by default it will undergo a redefinition of identity. If vigorous theological leadership is not provided, it will also experience a wrenching, fundamental, and distinctives-destroying theological shift. It is irresponsible to pretend that such problems do not exist.
7. There may be good reasons, even strong reasons, for retaining the Mennonite name for Mennonite Brethren in North America at present, but none of these reasons appear to be Bible-based. They all turn out, it seems, to be sentimental or sociological. to camouflage such non-theological reasons with theological language distorts the truth and constitutes unacceptable self-serving rationalization.
8. Theological regeneration involving a renewed commitment to biblically-rooted Anabaptist values will likely not occur unless elected or other leaders boldly challenge theological and practical drift.
9. If one begins with the proposition, substantially valid in secular terms, that European-rooted Mennonites constitute a Mennonite peoplehood, and that anything which might disturb its tranquility must be avoided, then, clearly any talk about distinguishing between ethnic community and faith community has no place. Of course, according to such unsound assumptions the 1860 Mennonite Brethren renewal must also be cast in a negative light. It was, after all, divisive just as certainly as it was regenerative.
10. The questions of ethnic emphasis and of which ethnic-faith arrangements should constitute the optimal are important and relevant even if at times they may bore us.
11. Some segments of modern Mennonitism have become nothing more than fine cultural values with varying blends of ritualized and formalized theology, and an increasingly politicized peace position. This situation prevails despite official confessional statements and repeated assertions to the contrary. Even if we were not the generation forced to come to grips with the ethnic question, we ought

to ask ourselves to what extent we need to reassess association with some inherited and theologically questionable Mennonitism. Like the Jews of old, we also tend to add to the Scriptures the precepts of men, or in this case supposedly of Menno, even though Menno himself, if he were here, would surely remonstrate vigorously.

12. The hundreds of responses received concerning the central tenets and recasting of priorities presented in A PEOPLE APART would seem to indicate that those tenets and priorities have been found valid. As one respondent put it, "we need to place ourselves in the non-believer's position and realize what it means to have no heritage and no place in history except through Jesus our King". (3) In this connection we must affirm that tradition is less important than truth and that, as explained in Romans 2:17-29, even belief in and knowledge of God's book can turn out to be inadequate. The outward, external forms and designations have no ultimate value. We should not act as if they do.
13. The main thesis of A PEOPLE APART is that ethnic Mennonites now face a problem and it is not what a new name should be. The main challenge consists of a call back to Biblical Anabaptist theology. The name question, though significant, must be secondary.
14. There are several distinct, though related, reasons why contemporary Mennonite Brethren need to address the ethnic question. Given what the term Mennonite has come to mean, the use of it for church designation has become theologically problematic. Second, given the increasingly multi-ethnic composition of the North American Mennonite Brethren conference, conference inaction creates at best only confusion and at worst tragic marginalization of ethnic groups other than the one by which the conference names itself. Third, an increasing number of Mennonite Brethren pastors do not accept Anabaptist theology. Urging or admonishing them to embrace and espouse the official Confession of Faith becomes very difficult when that confession is fused with a particular ethnicity which many of them do not share. We thus make it difficult for the conference to re-establish the desired doctrinal norms and easy for those who tilt in the opposite direction to keep moving in that direction. Thus we exacerbate the already difficult problem of re-establishing unity based on doctrinal orthodoxy.
15. There will always be a few, but only a few, individuals who by great efforts of accommodation manage to jump all the hurdles and merge into the Mennonite ethnic family. Let us not draw general conclusions from these relatively rare exceptions.
16. The question of dropping or minimizing the Mennonite designation should not be seen as uniquely North American. For example, twenty-one essentially Mennonite Brethren congregations of "Umsiedler" in the German Federal Republic have formed a conference which they call the Evangelical Baptist Brethren Church, "die Evangelische Baptistische Brudergemeinde". (4) Such a step, while logical, evokes puzzlement given the especially shrill, even sarcastic, denunciation by several leaders among the "Umsiedler" in Germany of any reconsideration of "Mennonite" as a conference designation. (5)

In this connection, a major report from Gerhard Ratzlaff, editor of the Konferenzblatt, the organ of the Mennonite Brethren conference in Paraguay, deserves very careful thought. Because of its significance most of it appears here in translation. (Mennonitische Rundschau, August 5, 1987, 10) A photocopy of the original has been appended as Exhibit A.

Who is a Mennonite?

Each year, in IBA and in Cemta, I begin my instruction in Mennonite history with this question. I am struck by the uniformity of answers which the students always give me. Below you will find answers given by a class in 1984, answers which I very carefully took down at that time. A Spanish-speaking Paraguayan-"Mennonite" in the third year of Bible School said, "Mennonites are blond people with blue eyes. They live mostly in the Chaco".

Upon being reminded that, in fact, he was a member of a congregation which officially called itself Mennonite, he answered confidently: "We Paraguayans are not Mennonites". All the other students, including those with blue eyes, concurred with this explanation. This class also included a student from the Chulupie and one from the Lengua churches in the Chaco, who are the product of Mennonite missionary activity in the Chaco. Both were asked if they were Mennonites or could become Mennonites. The question was answered with a shaking of the head and laughter: "Nunca" - never.

What do Paraguayans say when their fellow countrymen inquire about their church membership? "Evangelicos" and not "Mennonitas" is the almost uniform answer. Why do these people not identify themselves as Mennonite? Because in many instances the Paraguayan public would not believe them and they could not explain to them what a Mennonite is. It is too complicated! From time to time one actually hears the recommendation from Spanish-speaking students, that the name Mennonite should be limited to German-speaking Mennonites...

The Paraguayan people consider as Mennonite all of the people who live in the colonies, including those who are not converted and do not belong to any church.

The Mennonites [in the colonies] have a "Privileg" which applies only to them and which excuses from military service even the youths who are unbelievers...(6)

It would be a great mistake to dismiss such situations and concerns out of hand. A PEOPLE APART addresses such concerns and explains very clearly how such fundamental and wide-ranging problems can be resolved. The critics, it seems, have by and large not even acknowledged the existence of such problems, let alone offered any solution. Presumably, their response is to do nothing and to let the situation deteriorate even further.

17. If ethnic Mennonite Brethren do not take specific steps to acknowledge the existence of a multi-ethnic, though still predominantly Mennonite, Anabaptist conference, including a variety of non-Mennonite local congregations sometimes utilizing their own diverse languages, then within less than a generation we will become a non-Anabaptist, loosely bound association of churches theologically indistinguishable from typical North American evangelicalism. The formerly Evangelical Mennonite Brethren conference is already treading the path which we will then be travelling.
18. We must stress the Biblical imperative and motivation. It must override all other considerations. With Paul we must affirm that we will do anything short of sinning in order to win men and women to Christ and to build Christ's church. The Gospel, after all, constitutes both a commission and a compulsion. It seems that most critics, instead of being willing to become all things to all people, are unwilling to give up anything, at least if it weakens ethnic preeminence. For them, maintenance seems to take unquestioned precedence over mission. A statement by Henry J. Schmidt and fellow U.S. conference leaders says it well. "The church will either evangelize within this culture or be swallowed up by it. The assignment from God [is] to work within this cultural context...." (7)
19. If it is necessary to debate the question of what Scripture dictates in terms of penetrating our community and the world, then our problem is deeper than heretofore assumed.
20. The perspective undergirding A PEOPLE APART constitutes nothing novel. It seeks to reflect God's long-standing norms for a faithful believers' church. Part of our problem as Mennonite Brethren is that we have retained the proper language about the believers' church and even some of the forms but have lost some of the essence.

C. THE KEY QUESTIONS

In order to deal with the ethnicity-faith question properly, we must ask the right questions and understand how they interrelate. Most of the following sequential questions and answers rest on what has been established by answers to previous questions.

1. Do Mennonites constitute an ethnic group?

In some countries they do. In those countries where they have become an ethnic group, religion still constitutes a major component of ethnic distinctions and therefore such Mennonites may be termed ethnoreligious.

Most critics of A PEOPLE APART readily concede the point. But ethnic reality must nonetheless be stressed because, when the logical and practical implications of official Mennonite ethnic dominance in the faith community become problematic, many of these same critics seek cover by implying or expressly stating that "Mennonite" really does mean religious.

2. Do Dutch-German-Russo Mennonites, perhaps with an increasingly integrated Swiss-German wing, constitute an ethnic or ethnoreligious group?

Yes, the evidence is set forth in Chapter 3 and 4 of A PEOPLE APART. The research, empirical and other, seeks not to prove the point but to illustrate it and to present convincing evidence.

3. Do Dutch-German-Russo Mennonites, perhaps with a Swiss-German wing, constitute an ethnic or ethnoreligious group in North America?

Yes, the evidence is compelling. It is puzzling to note some critics belittling A PEOPLE APART for documenting this reality but at other times arguing as if that fact has not been established. One senses a fundamental inconsistency.

4. Do the Mennonite Brethren in North America constitute an ethnic or ethnoreligious group?

Yes, the evidence appears in A PEOPLE APART, especially in Chapter 5. Although a handful of conference committee members, perhaps 5% of the senior pastors, and about 15% to 20% of the church membership (excluding Quebec) are not ethnic Mennonites, the dominance and pervasiveness of Mennonite ethnicity in the Mennonite Brethren congregations in North America remains firmly entrenched. Most congregations consist of a peoplehood simultaneously ethnic and religious. In itself that constitutes no problem.

5. What does the word Mennonite mean?

In North America and in several additional countries the term has a double meaning, one ethnic and the other religious. The fact that the ethnic meaning includes a religious component for most people does not mitigate the fact that one meaning, perhaps the dominant meaning, is ethnic.

6. Does the preeminence or dominance of a particular ethnic group in a church or conference constitute a problem?

No. In itself the minority or majority status of an ethnic group constitutes no problem. Majority or even minority ethnic status may, however, be used for manipulative or self-serving purposes. It is possible to use a good thing for bad ends.

7. Is ethnocentrism acceptable in a church or conference?

No. John E. Toews and Hugo Zorilla have stated the issue clearly.

The critical issue facing Mennonite peoplehood today is the question of Mennonite identity.... Ethnocentrism of all forms and varieties is sin. The new Mennonite reality calls for a Mennonite identity that is profoundly Jesus-centred and genuinely universal.... Clarity about identity is prior to any task in the kingdom.... Our text (I Peter 2:4-10) call us to a Jesus-centredness and to an

ethnoreligious inclusiveness.... Our mission means the rejection of all ethnocentrism. (8)

The definition of ethnocentrism becomes critical. By ethnocentrism I mean, "Belief in the superiority of one's own ethnic group", (9) and "the emotional attitude that one's own race, nation, or culture is superior to all others", (10) as well as "the practice of regarding one's own race or culture as superior to others". (11)

Other definitions stress not so much notions of being superior as the idea of being at the center: "The tendency to evaluate matters by reference to the values shared in the subject's own ethnic group as if they were the centre of everything", (12) and again, "The view that oneself and the group to which one belongs is at the centre of everything, and that all other groups are seen only in relation to this central group, thus implying their inferiority". (13)

8. Does naming a multi-ethnic conference by the name of one, even the major, ethnic group constitute ethnocentrism?

Yes, it constitutes ethnocentrism not only because of the official elevation of the ethnic name but because members of other ethnic groups are required to take on an ethnic name other than their own in order to become full-fledged members in the church or conference. Such an insistence contradicts the Biblical requirement as set forth in Ephesians 2, Philippians 3, and Colossians 3:11 where Paul emphasizes that in Christ's church "there is neither Greek nor Jew,... Barbarian, or Scythian...."

Additionally, Mennonites have often referred to themselves as ethnocentric. For example, in 1965, when the Mennonites of Canada presented a brief to Canada's Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism they introduced their major brief by saying, "Two contrasting characteristics of the Mennonite people - internationalism on the one hand and ethnocentrism on the other hand - provide the base for, and background to this brief.... Our first-hand experience of Mennonite ethnocentrism...." (14)

At this point, we must be careful not to squirm out of our logical and theological dilemma by backtracking on the question of what the term Mennonite means and thus seeking an easy way out by asserting that actually "Mennonite" is a religious term. It is to prevent such definitional flip-flopping that A PEOPLE APART goes to great lengths to document the fact that Mennonite means ethnic. We must not let go of Paul Toews' correct assessment: "The proof that Mennonites are ethnic is easy enough to establish." (15) Mennonites "became an ethnic community in the classic sense of that term - a people with a distinctive sense of peoplehood". (16)

9. Should ethnicity and faith be fully separated in the church?

No, they should not be fully separated in the church or elsewhere. The author's perspective is stated unequivocally in A PEOPLE APART. Religious faith should be separated "merely from the official and central and only from the official and central" ethnic emphasis. (17) Again, "Let me state emphatically that I have no desire

to separate ethnicity fully from faith in any operational sense. They will, and should, remain linked, but not in a way which explicitly or implicitly causes people of other cultures to feel like second-class participants". (18) This perspective is stated several times.

Surprisingly, some reviewers insist on misrepresenting the author's position. "He would like to see religion and ethnicity separated...." (19) Again, theological traditions and ethnicity "both remain, but now segregated". (20) Surely the reviewers should acknowledge the difference between making the ethnic emphasis secondary and attempting to separate the two totally. To attempt total separation would be both unwise and impossible. Nowhere has the author suggested that such an irresponsible attempt should be made.

10. Is a name change necessary?

Yes, although "any name change, by itself, will not get us very far". (21) Unfortunately the book's emphasis has been widely misrepresented, for example, one reviewer wrote, "he believes a name change will produce a theology change, his ultimate goal". (22) A name change is necessary but not sufficient. A name change without changes in attitudes and actions will not do much good.

11. Should the church function as the bearer of Mennonite culture?

Not officially. To be sure, all churches serve as bearers of culture but a multi-ethnic church should not be saddled with the task of officially championing a particular micro-minority ethnicity and culture, especially not when the general societal language has been adopted and the group in question takes the Great Commission seriously. The mandated task of the church must take precedence over all else. A dilemma we may face involves a weakness, in some regions, of other agencies to nurture and perpetuate Mennonite culture. Nevertheless, even if it should be the case that ethnic Mennonitism cannot be vigorously nurtured outside of an official and preeminent church-ethnicity fusion, such a situation would not justify a switching of the church's mandate to something self-serving and partially secular.

In sum, we need to describe our Mennonite history and then reemphasize it as a secondary priority in the church. If we insist on designating the church by the name of this secondary value, then we are in fact implying that it remains primary.

Just as Christians have no right to use the church to pursue economic ends, so also we have no right to use the church to pursue ethnic goals. The former we readily acknowledge, the latter many of us try to deny. The two practices are equally unacceptable.

12. Are Mennonites unique in facing a faith-ethnicity problem?

No, many immigrant and some other groups face similar problems. Most such groups, however, have a lesser problem inasmuch as they do not build their ethnic identity into their official church name. For them, therefore, the task of becoming "all things to all men" is easier. Despite what several reviewers wrote, (23) the book does not

assume nor present a theory of Mennonite exceptionality.

Here, again, some reviewers appear to have missed the point stated clearly in *A PEOPLE APART*. One reviewer wrote, "Everyone knows that there are substantial differences between Irish Catholics, Italian Catholics and Mexican Catholics". (24) Although this reviewer has repeatedly acknowledged that in North America Mennonites are an ethnic people, in developing his defense for retention of Mennonite as a conference designation, he seems readily to revert to using Mennonite as analogous to Catholic, a specifically religious label.

The review in question was published in September, 1987. *A PEOPLE APART*, published in early May, already responded to such criticisms which had come earlier from several Mennonite theologians and historians who had read the manuscript.

Several readers wondered whether ethnic diversity should not be seen as being analogous to having "Irish Catholics, Italian Catholics, and Mexican Catholics" in our society. Obviously they assumed that the word Mennonite was analogous to the word Catholic. In one sense they are right but in another sense not. I suggest that the major point which this book has documented is that in North America, and in some other regions, the term Mennonite is also, if not primarily, analogous to Irish, Italian, and Mexican. Accordingly, if we want to retain both usages of the word Mennonite, and if we also want to be consistent, then we should speak not only of Japanese Mennonite Brethren, Chinese Mennonite Brethren, French-Canadian Mennonite Brethren, and East Indian Mennonite Brethren, but also of Mennonite Mennonite Brethren. (25)

13. Is not the main problem a matter of attitude, a sense of ethnic superiority, rather than name?

No, because we cannot address the question of attitude without addressing the matter of name. Enshrining an ethnic designation in a conference name reflects a basic attitude, a set of values, which cannot be denied by simply saying "it isn't so".

14. Are Mennonite, or Mennonite Brethren doctrinal distinctives at issue?

No, they are not. Therefore the strong defense by some theologians of the Mennonite name for supposedly theological reasons seems puzzling.

15. Do other religious groups build ethnicity into their names?

A few do, notably Hutterites, Doukhobors, and some churches which serve linguistic minorities such as Chinese, Greeks, and Hmong people. Among evangelically minded groups the ethnic designation generally falls away when the group adopts usage of the country's language.

16. Is ethnic homogeneity a requirement for an effective, dynamic, and covenant community-building church?

No. Even a casual acquaintance with the Christian Gospel propels us in the opposite direction.

17. Can "Anabaptist" serve as a suitable conference name?

Both "Mennonite" and "Anabaptist" emerged as 16th century nicknames with pejorative connotation. The former has evolved into an ethnic name, the latter not. The latter has become a respected theological label. Walter Klaassen, a foremost authority on the subject, observes that "Anabaptist...has become the positive identifier of an honoured tradition". (26)

In addition to its theological appropriateness, we should note its widespread usage today among religious Mennonites and in society generally.

Interestingly, former seminary president Elmer Martens writes, concerning capital punishment, "we Anabaptists have much homework to do on how the Old and New Testaments relate to each other". (27) Perhaps his statement should not really be surprising since the August 6, 1987 "Mission Statement; Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary" states: "The Seminary affirms its theological roots in the Anabaptist movement of the Reformation, as well as its affinity to more recent evangelical traditions of Europe and America".

The truly widespread understanding and usage of Anabaptist comes through clearly in major works such as Anabaptists Four Centuries Later (28) and Continuity and Change Among Canadian Mennonite Brethren (29) Such evidence also appears with increasing frequency in periodicals and the popular press. Massive numbers of examples could be cited.

18. Must Anabaptist be part of a new name?

No, although a commitment to have the name signal a particular theological orientation means that the name should probably include Anabaptist or peace or discipleship or a variation of one of these three. Anabaptist should probably rank first because of its uniqueness, its historical value, its theological connotation, its widespread role in providing theological and social cohesion for religious Mennonites globally as well as locally, and its wide usage even without a formal name change.

19. Would a name change not create major problems overseas?

No, many Mennonites overseas are themselves grappling with the problem, some have already dropped the name. As documented in A PEOPLE APART, the name has caused many problems abroad.

20. Is it possible for a non-Mennonite to become a Mennonite?

Yes, with much difficulty. Some people manage to go through all the hoops. Just as some non-Jews become Jews and some English

individuals, mostly through intermarriage, have become French-Canadian, so also small numbers of non-Mennonites manage gradually to become Mennonites. Normally the process requires at least two generations before full ethnic membership is acquired.

The process involves difficulty and requires dedication and perseverance. "Some have attempted to become part of this group, but in the process have experienced feelings of alienation, discrimination and non-acceptance." (30) MB pastor Mark Johnson writes:

A number of years ago, before I joined the MB church, I, along with many of my friends and relatives, perceived Mennonites (with or without the "Brethren") as a good, devout, ethnic people. It would never have occurred to us to become Mennonites. I joined the MB church after having worked through this perception. It was an intense struggle at times. I'm not sure it is in the best interest of either church or the new converts to require them to struggle with this perception.... (31)

Pastor Paul Wartman, a "non-ethnic Mennonite" MB leader, focuses the issue for us theologically. In a penetrating review of Martha Denlinger Stahl's By Birth or by Choice. Who can become a Mennonite? he writes:

Her solution is to call the church to greater effort at incorporating the "new-comers" into the life and culture of the "Mennonite way".... Unfortunately Martha Denlinger Stahl does not deal with the critical issues.... Based on our understanding of God's word we train missionaries to adopt to the culture of the people to whom they are sent with the gospel of Jesus Christ (some call it cross-cultural communication). On North American soil we defend the opposite theology of missions.... This book encourages ethnic Mennonites to feel comfortable about calling others to come join us.... (32)

21. Is it possible for a non-Mennonite to become an Anabaptist?

Yes, that involves a religious decision in itself and does not require any rejection of ethnicity. If the congregation in question consists primarily of some other ethnic group, there must be mutual respect.

22. Will the ethnic problem not be solved simply with the passage of time?

No, because in many regions Mennonite ethnicity, fortunately, remains vigorous and resilient. We should not wish it to be otherwise. That means, however, that we have no defensible basis for calling leaders and one another back to Biblical Mennonitism, given that Mennonite also means ethnic. The tragic result is that even as some MB and other Mennonite leaders stubbornly cling to the Mennonite name as a conference designation, we simultaneously continue to lose our Biblical Anabaptist theology and, at the local level, also the Mennonite name. The "Mennonite at all cost" mindset will definitely turn out to be a "lose-lose" option. The evidence is already sadly

impressive.

Of course, many critics see no problem. They ask, "What's the problem?" If I held their assumptions I, too, would ask that question.

23. Would a name change really make any difference?

Not by itself, at least not very much. A name change without changes in action and attitude would be no solution. Similarly, changes in attitude and actions not accompanied by a name change lack credibility.

24. What must Mennonites be prepared to give up?

Only a reduction in the preeminence of some secular values and some human advantages in the church. In A PEOPLE APART, Mennonites are being challenged to give up much less that Paul requires of himself in Philippians 3.

25. Does Mennonite ethnic emphasis really make a significant difference?

Yes, even though some Mennonite leaders emphasize that ethnic origin makes no difference in the church. But practices belie such words. What we Mennonites are really saying at present, and not at all subtly, is that ethnic origin makes no difference provided that people in all other ethnic groups end up calling themselves by our ethnic name. Thus the Mennonite ethnic emphasis may not make a significant difference for Mennonites but it makes a big difference for everybody else.

At issue, thus, is both what we call ourselves and what we will emphasize.

D. SOME REFLECTIONS

After another careful reading of A PEOPLE APART and a thorough review of the hundreds of responses, the following reflections may be noteworthy.

1. A religious organization, especially a conservative one, tends by its very nature to be hobbled, sometimes trapped, by its history and its conservative customs. Mennonites have become comfortable with conventional priorities and practices. Given this reality, the assertion that our ethnoreligiosity constitutes no problem becomes a very satisfying myth. Intellectually we all know that unity in Christ comes in the midst of diversity and complementarity. In practical terms, however, we Mennonites have found this reality difficult and problematic.
2. Some people have become so emotionally aroused by the discussion concerning the essence of Mennonitism that they cannot think about the subject rationally. Some have said they cannot even "see straight"! They are battle-ready before they know either the evidence or the questions. Their minds are closed and they quickly get involved with mostly emotional arguments. We must continue to plead with such people to take thought before they take sides.

3. After generations of well-developed and effective reinforcement of a particular form of faith-ethnicity fusion, it becomes very difficult for a sectarian church to let go in order to grow theologically and ethnically. We have developed a strong tendency to interpret our situation from the perspective of our own bias. Given such extensive social conditioning some sectarians tend to perceive diversity as adversity.
4. We must move from confusion in theology and ecclesiological identification to clarity and a new confidence. We need to recognize disfunctional ambiguity for what it is. In moving towards logical clarification let us not depreciate our social heritage for that always creates serious identity problems. As we dominant Mennonites proceed to a less official and a less church-based affirmation of our rich Mennonite ethnic heritage, let us not accuse one another of being ashamed of who we are. The question centres on a proper humility not on an improper shame.
5. Basically A PEOPLE APART constitutes a call for more Anabaptism by which is meant biblicism as understood in the Anabaptist tradition. The numerous critics who, while also supporting the Anabaptist cause, categorically disagree with the analysis and general recommendations of A PEOPLE APART, should perhaps think again. Maybe their criticism is misplaced. They would do well to support A PEOPLE APART and suggest improvements and refinements in the arguments. Their thoroughgoing defense of the present official fusion and the accompanying trends will prove disappointing. If we follow their prescription then they, and we, will gradually lose both the name and the theology. The critics will eventually become disillusioned but then it will be too late.

Perusal of any issue of the Christian Leader tells the developing story. For example, the issue of October 13, 1987, mentions twelve churches by name on page 18, 19 and 20: three "Neighborhood", three MB, two "community", two Bible", one "Christian Fellowship", and one having only a geographic designation. On page 23, a new church is mentioned; it calls itself a "Bible" church. Thus only three of the thirteen supposedly Mennonite Brethren churches still have MB in their name. Can we not discern the omens?

6. The analysis and proposals in A PEOPLE APART provide an explanation of the current global diversity of Mennonite faith-ethnicity relations as well as a model which permits both Mennonite ethnicity and Anabaptist theology to thrive without doing violence to either. I am unaware of any other analysis or proposal which even attempts to spell out such an analysis and goal.
7. Some critics have made much of the article by Martin E. Marty, "Ethnicity: The Skeleton of Religion in America". (33) Marty stresses "peoplehood" but he is not referring to an intrinsically Christian, let alone Anabaptist, meaning. Thus he speaks of "a developing sense of 'peoplehood' among blacks" and peoplehood among "9.2 million Americans of Spanish descent".

Marty writes that "In this essay, 'racial' is a species of the genus 'ethnic'". Not surprisingly, then, he describes how

"nationalist separatist groups in Quebec gathered around French culture and Catholic faith" and explains how "the racial and ethnic self-consciousness of what had been called the 'minority groups' led to a new sense of peoplehood". Consistently he posits ethnic groups and demonstrates how religion has strengthened them or played a role in their self-discovery as an ethnic group. If our main concern is the well-being of the Mennonite ethnic group, then he has some important insights for us. If, however, with Paul, we view ethnicity as secondary to the church and the well-being of the church is our primary concern, then we must see his informative article as only descriptive, not as prescriptive. It has very little to do with the mission of the church and very much to do with secular reflections on societal trends.

8. Some critics have made much of Timothy Smith's "Religion and Ethnicity in America". (34) Again we must take note of definitions. He writes about "The sense of peoplehood...which I take to be the essence of ethnicity". Like Marty, he analyzes thoroughly how religions and ethnicity often tend to be intertwined. As with Marty, so also with Smith, the starting point is the ethnic group, not the church. Understandably, therefore, he emphasizes that "modern ethnic movements function chiefly to protect or advance the economic, cultural, or religious interest of persons who...believe they constitute one people". Further, he elaborates on "inherited patterns of language, religion, and regional culture", and speaks of, "the functional significance of religion in culture". Again and again he shows how ethnic groups have "mobilized religious sentiments to serve ethnic purposes". He explains brilliantly how "religious awakening helped define both the boundaries and the moral ideals of ethnic groups...." In fact, "boundary maintenance" of ethnoreligious communities appears to be one of his key concerns. He has thus deftly helped us to contrast two distinctly different views of the church. One sees the church as a major entity working within ethnic groups. The other, not fully spelled out in Smith's article, posits the church as the larger framework within which ethnic groups can function as major but not over-riding entities. The Mennonite Brethren conference is now in the process of deciding which model it will accept as normative.

My thesis is clear. God is not interested in transforming other people into Mennonites but into Christians. Our mandate, given that we agree that Mennonite also means ethnic, is not to "Mennonitize" but to Christianize.

9. Of all the responses to A PEOPLE APART, the one which I found most perplexing was set forth by Elmer Thiessen, a professor of philosophy at Medicine Hat College in Alberta. His lengthy article was sent to the Mennonite Brethren Herald and various MB leaders in September, 1987. Because it stands as significant in its own right and also incorporates views expressed less eloquently by others, I shall present part of his critique. I trust I have understood him correctly.

Having acknowledged that "there are various ethnic groups: English, Mennonite, Ukrainian..." and that "Mennonite ethnicity is alive and well", Thiessen then argues that "Christianity can and must also be viewed as a form of ethnicity". Ignoring the vital

distinction between "ethnos" as the Christian church and "ethnos" as an often secular or at least substantially secular "racial" group, he proceeds to mix apples and oranges in a strange way. He acknowledges that "Mennonite" has two totally different meanings but insists that "There need be nothing confusing about using the word 'Mennonite' in two different senses".

Thiessen points to other words having two meanings - his examples are "ruler, bank, bat, table". What he fails to recognize, it seems to me, is that his analogies are not valid. He correctly states that "There is nothing unusual about one word being used in two different senses", as in the case of ruler, but that hardly proves his point. To speak of ruler as a measuring instrument and of ruler as a government official creates no problem, but to speak of Mennonites as both Christian "ethnos" and as cultural "ethnos" surely does, because we know, as Thiessen is forced to acknowledge, that there exists a partial but only a partial overlap of the two kinds of Mennonite "ethnos".

Thiessen's categories and peculiar line of logic cannot explain how inherited cultural "ethnos" relates to a multi-ethnic, voluntary, believers' church. An inherited cultural "ethnos" and a voluntary believers' church are not the same thing, in fact, they come close to being mutually exclusive. Thiessen avoids that point. He argues, at least infers repeatedly, that we should simply accept the idea that both types of ethnos are Mennonite, and then, as I understand him, we will have no problem.

Thiessen's views must surely leave most readers thoroughly bewildered. If a non-believing Mennonite is a real Mennonite, which he clearly accepts, and if a non-Mennonite joins a Mennonite church and thus becomes a Mennonite, according to Thiessen's second meaning, then what does it mean to be a Mennonite? Thiessen's lengthy analysis provides no answers. We are confidently advised simply to call the various categories "Mennonite" and to believe with him that "there is nothing inherently 'contradictory' in this...." (35)

10. Of the several hundred responses and critiques which have come to me, less than 30 percent have been negative. Of those, fewer than ten have tried to make a logically argued case against my three-fold proposal. Of the more or less carefully reasoned critiques, most have simply argued for ethnicity. A few have made a case for the well-being of the church. With reference to the latter I am reminded of Paul Hiebert's wise words. "The ultimate task of the church...is not to build itself, but to glorify God and to build His kingdom on earth". (36) Is our gaze fixed on God or on God's people? There is a difference, a very consequential difference. Significantly, to date not a single critic has attempted to base his criticism on Biblical teachings.

Some critics, it seems, provide evidence of being more in love with Mennonitism than with Christianity. That is a strong statement but it describes an honest impression. Moreover, some seem to think that their defense of officially established Mennonitism in the church in itself expresses and proves the religious quality of their assumptions. In fact, most of them, I suggest, rest their case on assumptions obviously not Anabaptist.

11. Those critics who make the case for official church-ethnic group fusion should consider carefully James Coggins' prescient observation. "In attempting to separate from the world, Mennonites became an ethnic group.... Instead of compromising with the world, they compromised with worldly ethnic Mennonites". (37) That's the reality with which we must deal.
12. Two major categories of people oppose the suggested name change. Some adamantly endorse traditional church-reinforced Mennonitism, "Mennonitenum". Perhaps they keep on singing, "The Church's One Foundation" including the phrase, "One holy name she blesses", but the name they defend so staunchly is not the one mentioned in the old hymn. To them I say, "To hang everything on an unintentionally acquired, 'man-made' name is to say that 'the clothes make the man', collectively." Members of the second group dislike the theological connotation of Anabaptist. Most of them seem to have understood very well the issues at stake, the intended theological direction or redirection. For them I underscore the MB collective commitment to Biblical Anabaptism, though I stress that I am not wedded to any one name.

Concerning names I suggest that the following, ranked according to personal preference, should be among those being considered: (Note the altered form of the first two.)

The Evangelical Anabaptist Church
 The Evangelical Anabaptist Church (Mennonite Brethren)
 The Evangelical Peace Church
 The Discipleship Church
 The Christian Peace Church
 The Covenant Peace Church

Clearly, additional combinations and abbreviations could be added, as well as many other suggestions. Is it too much to hope that should a new name be chosen, it ought to incorporate the emphasis of our official theology.

13. The contents of A PEOPLE APART can be misread and distorted. Some critics have twisted what has been written and have put ideas in a light that was never intended. Further, a few seem to think that if one error has been detected or if improvement of the survey can be demonstrated - which is not hard to do - then the central thesis has been invalidated. Let us not lose a sense of proper proportion.
14. Many critics and other respondents have made numerous, very useful, comments. Some have suggested excellent improvements and have identified shortcomings. If there will be a second edition of the book, it will be much improved because of them.
15. Sometimes the issues become confused. Even if we presently faced no ethnic problem and the related name issue, we would still have a major theological and a related polity problem. The two concerns - ethnic and theological - now appear on our agenda together because research into the local name problem, initiated by the Canadian BSSC (BFL), revealed that the local name problem is part of a larger problem having both ethnic and theological elements. Additional research also

showed that resolving the main theological problem, the gradual slippage away from Anabaptism, cannot be undertaken without also addressing the ethnic issue. Leaders and followers who seriously question Anabaptist theology will not easily be coaxed back to the official conference stance. In particular they will hardly respond positively by a call to a "double-meaning" Mennonitism, no matter how loudly and frequently that call rings out.

E. CONCLUSION

Church renewal in 1525 and 1860 increased Biblical and historical rootedness. It can do so again in 1987 and beyond. Exhortations towards such a renewal should not be brushed aside, nor attacked, nor trivialized. Nor should they be equated with disruption. They should be carefully considered and weighed. Not all hearers will agree. Presumably we can, however, disagree within a larger framework of unity.

Though we sometimes describe ourselves as a covenant community we currently find ourselves in rather sharp disagreement concerning both the goal and the method of working towards Anabaptist renewal. That problem will take much time and numerous seminary graduating classes to resolve. In the interim we should keep on reminding ourselves that creative tension is a sign of health, not of sickness. As we dialogue, let us put forth an honest effort to hear and understand what the other person is saying.

As part of the people of God we need to take the long view. That means trying to view a situation from God's perspective rather than only subjectively.

A PEOPLE APART has tried to combine subjective analysis with the long view. The three-part proposal challenges the constituency with a tall order. The order became tall because the evidence became compelling.

But some tentativeness remains. I am more sure of my analysis than of my proposal, especially its practicality. I am hopeful but not unequivocally convinced that the situation can be corrected. We may already have waited too long, especially in the United States. The situation is very serious. Both theological diversity and identity erosion are far advanced. I am, however, fully convinced that if the situation can be corrected, then addressing all three components of the proposal is the best and the right thing to do in trying to achieve that correction. Given the magnitude of the issues it is worth trying.

Whatever the odds, we cannot ignore this agenda, for we are talking about ideas that refuse to go away.

ENDNOTES

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3. Phil Shea, Mennonite Brethren Herald, June 12, 1987, p. 11.
4. Gerhard Hamm, in conversation with the author, Waterloo, Ontario, June 2, 1987.
5. See, for example, articles by Jakob Siebert and Heinrich Woelk, Mennonitische Rundschau, May 27, 1987, pp. 12 and 13 and by Abram J. Loewen and others, Mennonitische Rundschau, June 10, 1987, pp. 13 and 14.
6. Ratzlaff, Mennonitische Rundschau, August 5, 1987, 10.
7. The Christian Leader, June 26, 1984, p. 3.
8. Quoted in A PEOPLE APART, pp. 4-5.
9. Houghton Mifflin Canadian Dictionary of the English Language, 1980. p. 450.
10. Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary, Unabridged, 1983, p. 628.
11. The World Book Dictionary, Vol. 1, 1978, p. 728.
12. The International Encyclopedia of Sociology, p. 115.
13. David Davies, A Dictionary of Anthropology, (London: Frederick Muller, 1972), pp. 78-79.
14. Quoted in A PEOPLE APART, p. 87.
15. Paul Toews, "A People Apart or Pulling Apart^a a People", Journal of Mennonite Studies, Vol. 5, 1987, p. 144.
16. Quoted in A PEOPLE APART, p. 122.
17. A PEOPLE APART, p. 8.
18. A PEOPLE APART, p. 186.
19. Katie Funk Wiebe, "To be Mennonite", The Christian Leader, September 15, 1987, p. 16.
20. Paul Toews, "A People Apart or Pulling Apart a People", Journal of Mennonite Studies, Vol. 5, 1987, p. 145.
21. A PEOPLE APART, p. 185.

22. Katie Funk Wiebe, "To be Mennonite", The Christian Leader, September 15, 1987, p. 16.
23. Paul Toews, "A People Apart or Pulling Apart a People", Journal of Mennonite Studies, Vol. 5, 1987, p. 146.
24. Ibid., p. 146.
25. A PEOPLE APART, p. 186.
26. Walter Klaassen, "Between World and Faith: Menno Simons", Mennonite Reporter, March 16, 1987, p. 7.
27. Mennonite Brethren Herald, June 12, 1987, p. 10.
28. J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, Anabaptists Four Centuries Later (Scottsdale, P.A.: Herald Press, 1975).
29. Peter M. Hamm, Continuity and Change Among Canadian Mennonite Brethren (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1987).
30. Maria Siemens Matty, "Stories of non-ethnic newcomers...." Mennonite Reporter, August 31, 1987, p. 9.
31. Mennonite Brethren Herald, July 17, 1987, p. 12.
32. Mennonite Brethren Herald, August 7, 1987, p. 32.
33. Church History 41 (March, 1972), pp. 6-21.
34. American Historical Review 83 (December, 1978), pp. 1155-1185.
35. Elmer Thiessen, "Ethnicity and Christianity", unpublished manuscript, September, 1987, pp. 12.
36. The Christian Leader, April, 1976, p. 13.
37. Mennonite Brethren Herald, May 15, 1987, p. 31.

des Ersatzdienstes bereits empfohlen wird.

Der Hinweis, daß bereits 19 Länder den Ersatzdienst eingeführt haben und auf die entsprechende Gesetzgebung des jeweiligen Landes, dürfte ein starkes Argument für die positive Beurteilung unseres Antrags bei der Regierung sein.

Dem Antrag wurde ferner eine ausführliche Dokumentation vom Friedenskomitee des MCC, (Urban Peachy und Branda Hurst) beigelegt.

Das weltweite Wirken des MCC und IMO durch Freiwillige in vielen Ländern und von AMAS in Brasilien, verstärken unsere Begründungen des Antrags, durch unsere Überzeugung dem Frieden zu dienen.

Aus dem Antrag geht hervor, daß wir nicht um ein Privileg bitten, sondern um das Recht, dem Land und Volk nicht mit der Waffe sondern durch einen Dienst in Frieden zu dienen.

Die Mennoniten beanspruchen dieses Recht nicht nur für sich, sondern für alle diejenigen Bürger unseres Landes, die aus religiösen oder anderen Gewissensgründen den Militärdienst ablehnen.

Henrique Ens
Gerhard Klassen
Peter Pauls Junior
(Aus Bibel und Pflug)

Wer ist ein Mennonit?

Mit dieser Frage beginne ich seit Jahren meinen Unterricht in Mennonitengeschichte im IBA und im Cemta. Auffallend ist mir dabei die Einheitlichkeit der Antworten, die mir die Studenten immer geben. Es folgen Antworten einer Klasse aus dem Jahre 1984, die ich damals sorgfältig notierte: Ein spanisch-sprechender paraguayer-"Mennonit" im dritten Jahr der Bibelschule: "Mennoniten sind blonde Leute mit blauen Augen. Sie leben meist im Chaco".

Auf den Hinweis, daß er doch einer Gemeinde angehöre, die sich offiziell mennonitisch nennt, antwortete er sehr selbstbewußt: "Wir Paraguayer sind nicht Mennoniten — wir haben nur den Glauben der

Mennoniten angenommen." Alle übrigen Studenten, auch die blauäugigen, stimmten dieser Aussage zu. In dieser Klasse gab es auch je einen Studenten von den Chulupie- und Languagemeinden aus dem Chaco, die ja das Produkt der missionarischen Tätigkeit der Mennoniten im Chaco sind. Beide wurden gefragt, ob sie Mennoniten seien oder Mennoniten werden könnten. Die Frage wurde mit einem Kopfschütteln und Lachen beantwortet: "Nunca" - niemals.

Was antworten die paraguayischen "Mennoniten" wenn sie von ihren Landsleuten nach ihrer Gemeindegemeinschaft gefragt werden? "Evangelicos" und nicht "Mennonitas" ist die fast einstimmige Antwort. Warum identifiziert man sich nicht als Mennonit? Weil die Landesleute es ihnen in vielen Fällen nicht glauben würden und sie nicht erklären können, was ein Mennonit ist. Es ist zu kompliziert! Gelegentlich kommt sogar der Vorschlag von spanisch-sprechenden Studenten, den Namen Mennonit auf die deutschsprachigen Mennoniten zu begrenzen. Die Gründe dafür faße ich kurz zusammen:

1. Die Mennoniten (deutschsprachigen) leben in geschlossenen Kolonien.

2. Sie sprechen Deutsch und ein Dialekt (Plattdeutsch).

3. Die Paraguayer betrachten alle in den Kolonien lebenden Leute als Mennoniten, auch diejenigen, die weder bekehrt sind noch zu einer Gemeinde gehören.

4. Sie haben ein Privileg, das nur für sie gilt und auch solche Jugendliche vom Militärdienst befreit, die nicht gläubig sind.

5. Sie haben ihre eigene Kultur und Tradition die nahezu unzertrennlich mit ihrem religiösen Denken verbunden ist.

Sehr vielen "Paraguayer-Mennoniten", vielleicht den meisten, fällt es schwer sich außerhalb des Rahmens ihrer Gemeinde als Mennonit zu identifizieren. Unsere Sonderstellung als deutschsprachige Mennoniten hat viel zu dieser Notlage beigetragen. Durch einen entsprechenden Unterricht können wir viel dazu tun, ihnen ein gesundes Selbstbewußtsein als Mennonitische Glaubensbrüder zu geben.

Gerhard Ratzlaff, Schriftleiter, Konferenzblatt der MBG, Paraguay

Islam ist schlimmer als Kommunismus

Der Islam mit seinen 854 Millionen Anhängern stellt die größte Bedrohung der westlichen Zivilisation dar. Dies erklärte jetzt der Direktor des internationalen und überkonfessionellen Missionswerks "Jugend mit einer Mission", Floyd McClung (Amsterdam). In einem Interview sagte er, im Vergleich zum militanten Islam sei der Kommunismus "lammfromm". McClung, der früher als Missionar seiner charismatisch orientierten Organisation in Afghanistan tätig war: "Es ist viel leichter, in Osteuropa Christ zu sein als in Libyen, Irak, Iran, Afghanistan oder Saudi Arabien." Der moderne Islam habe zudem den Begriff des "heiligen Krieges" neu gedeutet. Früher habe man darunter vor allem den physischen Kampf gegen die Feinde verstanden, heute betrachte man ihn als einen "geistli-

chen" Krieg. Verstärkt würden beispielsweise in Mekka und Kairo Missionare ausgebildet, um den Islam zur "dominierenden Kraft" in der Welt zu machen. Der Islam ist, so McClung, zu einer "aggressiven, evangelistischen und militanten Religion" geworden. McClung bezeichnete die Situation im Libanon als einen "Blick in die Hölle". Im Nahen Osten seien die "Mächte der Finsternis" ungehemmt am Werk. Die Lage sei gekennzeichnet von Angst, Mißtrauen, Neid, Mißgunst und Machtstreben. McClung: "So ist die Hölle, und so ist der Islam. Unter dem Kommunismus herrscht wenigstens Ordnung." (idea)



