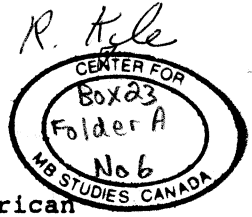


(Revised version)

NORTH AMERICAN MENNONITE BRETHREN AT MID-CENTURY:
ECCLESIOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS, 1940-1960



I

By the middle of the twentieth century most aspects of North American Mennonite Brethren life and culture had undergone significant changes. These developments naturally influenced the Mennonite Brethren church and its various institutions. As a consequence, the years from 1940 to 1960 were a time of transition, witnessing a number of new ecclesiastical developments.

Broadly interpreted, the subject of ecclesiological developments touches upon many areas of Mennonite Brethren life and culture. Whereas themes such as urbanization, the language change, and church-state issues are presented in other sessions at this conference, this paper will be limited to subjects more directly related to the church and its institutions. Thus, the focus will be on three topics: the shift from a fundamentalist outlook to an increased Anabaptist awareness; ministerial changes, especially the transition to a single salaried pastor; and alterations in the conference structure, including the "constitutional crisis" of 1954 and the merger with the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren. Moreover, while the unfolding of these developments in the Canadian conference will not be ignored, the limelight will be on the United States Conference, largely because these events impacted this conference more during the 1940s and 1950s.

These ecclesiastical changes, however, did not take place in a vacuum. They occurred in the larger context of the acculturation of the Mennonite Brethren. The Mennonite Brethren definitely represent a separationist type of Christianity. Though separation has meant different things throughout Mennonite Brethren history, until about the middle of the twentieth century, the Anabaptist doctrine of the two kingdoms and cultural isolation have been the major components in Mennonite Brethren separation from the world.¹ On the matter of separation, Mennonite Brethren theology has been relatively static: It has taught nonconformity to the world, separation, and a rigorous ethic since its Anabaptist origins and it teaches such now.² What has undergone modification is that the concept and practice of separation from the world has

acquired different meanings and interpretations as historical circumstances have changed.

Space only permits generalizations, but the history of the Mennonite Brethren in North America is one of progressive acceptance of cultural traits from the wider society on one hand, and a largely unsuccessful resistance to this acculturation on the other. Many factors contribute to this development, but the positive image of United States and Canada and the change from German to English must rank high.³ As a general statement, it would seem that an isolationist mind set and a tendency toward ethical legalism largely held sway in Mennonite Brethren circles until the mid-twentieth century in the United States and perhaps a decade larger in Canada. Therefore, when industrialization, urbanization, secularization, materialism, higher education, and the use of English became part of the Mennonite Brethren way of life, the old separationist cultural standards began to crumble. The Mennonite Brethren, for the most part, have not successfully replaced their earlier separation, based on culture, with an equally rigorous one grounded on Scripture.⁴

The assimilation of the Mennonite Brethren into American and Canadian culture had been going on for most of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, as Paul Toews indicates, "the cumulative impact of the North American experience was obvious by the 1940s and 1950s."⁵ What Orlando Harms says about the Southern District at the end of the 1950s was true for most Mennonite Brethren in the United States and somewhat later for their Canadian counterparts. They were "almost completely acculturated to the society around them. They spoke the same language, they dressed like everyone else, they and their children heard and saw the same radio and television programs which largely shaped their interests in the same direction."⁶ This acculturation affected many aspects of Mennonite Brethren church life. In respect to the subject of this paper, "Ecclesiological Developments," the question of a fundamentalist or Anabaptist orientation and the change to a professional ministry were particularly shaped by currents in North American culture.

II

Since their origins in 1860, the Mennonite Brethren have encountered a number of non-Anabaptist-Mennonite theological influences.⁷ In Russia the Pietists, Baptists, and Darbyites, in various degrees, helped shape Mennonite Brethren religious beliefs. Upon their arrival in North America, the Mennonite Brethren encountered Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, Lutherans, Swedenborgians, and other Mennonites, plus a wide array of religious movements including millennialists, prohibitionists, universalists, and revivalists.⁸

As the twentieth century progressed, the list comprised many other groups including dispensationalists, fundamentalists, perfectionists, charismatics and evangelicals. The greatest overall outside influence on the Mennonite Brethren experience in North America, particularly in the United States, came from the Baptists, dispensationalists, fundamentalists, and the more moderate but larger movement, contemporary evangelicalism.

Mennonite Brethren beliefs and practices have been shaped by a plurality of religious and cultural forces. In this sense, the years from 1940 to 1960 do not represent a striking departure from the usual Mennonite Brethren pattern. However, the two decades from 1940 to 1960 represent something of a transition. For most of these years, Mennonite Brethren theology came under the heavy sway of fundamentalism and one of its variants--dispensationalism. But the groundwork was being laid for a revival of the Anabaptist-Mennonite identity, which took off during the 1960s. As the year 1960 approached, indications of more interest in Anabaptist-Mennonite history and theology could be detected.

The Mennonite Brethren have been susceptible to outside theological currents because they have a non-creedal orientation and lack a strong doctrinal identification. In Russia their semi isolation in ethnic enclaves softened the influence of non-Mennonite theological systems. In North America the Mennonite Brethren did not live in ethnic colonies. Yet, for a while they succeeded in maintaining a degree of cultural identity.⁹ As a result, the Mennonite Brethren never developed a clear theological focus. Thus, as their

cultural cohesiveness broke down they were attracted to fundamentalist and dispensational doctrines that bore an affinity to their own beliefs.

Dispensationalism made its appearance in Mennonite Brethren churches in both Russia and North America at approximately the same time--the first decade of the twentieth century.¹⁰ These ideas, however, have had their greatest impact in the United States. Dispensationalism is a theological system that envisions redemptive history as revealed in the Bible in terms of seven distinct dispensations of time, during which people are tested in respect to obedience to the disclosed will of God.¹¹ In particular, this system brought to the Mennonite Brethren Church a system of rigid biblical interpretation and a premillennial-pretribulational eschatology.

Fundamentalism has many definitions, some broad and some restrictive. According to George Marsden, in American religion, fundamentalism best can be defined "as militantly antimodernist evangelical Protestantism." Though fundamentalism's roots go back much earlier, the term was not coined until 1920. It soon came "to describe all types of American Protestants who were willing to wage ecclesiastical and theological war against modernism" in religion and the cultural changes that modernists welcomed.¹²

The decades of the twenties, thirties, and forties saw fundamentalist and dispensational ideas make their way into the Mennonite Brethren Church via several avenues. The primary vehicle for dispensational doctrine to filter into the evangelical churches of North America was the Scofield Reference Bible. Nearly every Mennonite Brethren minister owned and utilized in varying degrees the Scofield Reference Bible. Some even came close to giving Scofield's notes a status equal with Scripture. The writings of other dispensationalists found their way into Mennonite Brethren circles. Most popular were those of Lewis S. Chafer, and Arno C. Gaebelein. In Canada, the publications of Erich Sauer, a teacher at Wiedenest Bible School in Germany, were widely read after World War II.¹³

Other means for disseminating fundamentalist/dispensational doctrine into Mennonite Brethren communities were radio broadcasts, Bible conferences

and especially the influence of Bible institutes.¹⁴ Of great importance, the Bible institutes attracted many Mennonite Brethren young people, giving them their leadership training and understanding of Scripture. As a consequence, these Bible institutes--especially Biola in Los Angeles, Moody in Chicago, and Northwestern in Minneapolis--powerfully influenced the spiritual development of the Mennonite Brethren Church.¹⁵

At Biola many future Mennonite Brethren leaders received their training from the noted fundamentalist, R. A. Torrey. In other more direct ways Torrey influenced Mennonite Brethren spiritual life. For several years, he was the speaker at the Tabor College Bible Conference and frequently conducted Bible conferences in Mennonite Brethren churches. Furthermore, his book, What the Bible Teaches, provided a doctrinal direction for many Mennonite Brethren for several decades.¹⁶

A large number of Mennonite Brethren also studied at Northwestern Bible Institute, then under the leadership of W. B. Riley, a well-known fundamentalist. Moreover, the writings of a Northwestern faculty member, Norman O. Harrison, were widely read by Mennonite Brethren from the 1930s to 1950s.¹⁷

Moody Bible Institute also influenced Mennonite Brethren spiritual life. D. L. Moody's devotional books provided preaching material for many Mennonite Brethren lay ministers. James M. Gray, the president of the institute after Moody, wrote Synthetic Bible Studies, a book that became a text in Mennonite Brethren Bible schools.¹⁸ The periodical Moody Monthly also found its way into many Mennonite Brethren households.

While not connected with the mentioned institutions, another significant influence came from John R. Rice, a fiery fundamentalist preacher and prolific author. His Christian weekly, The Sword of the Lord, which promoted fundamentalism and attacked modernism, penetrated many Mennonite Brethren homes.

Fundamentalist and dispensational teachings were readily and indiscriminately accepted in Mennonite Brethren ranks for several reasons.

The firm position of fundamentalism against modernism and for the essentials of the Christian faith matched the position staunchly held by many Mennonite Brethren.¹⁹ On a national level the Mennonite Brethren had little choice but fundamentalism or liberalism. Liberalism with its rejection of the historic Christian faith was not a viable option.²⁰ Therefore, the Mennonite Brethren bought into fundamentalist/dispensational teachings because of its positive attitude toward the authority of Scripture and salvation by grace.²¹

Furthermore, fundamentalism attracted many Mennonite Brethren because it reinforced certain characteristics already present in the fellowship, namely, authoritarianism, separation, and legalism in ethics.²²

A brief look at the decades of the 1940s and 1950s, especially the earlier years of this period, demonstrates the dominant role that fundamentalism and dispensationalism played in Mennonite Brethren Church life. One illustration can be seen in the brotherhood's readiness to affiliate with conservative Protestant organizations. The Evangelical Foreign Missions Association was born in 1943. The Mennonite Brethren immediately joined this organization, and have been in it ever since, even being involved in key leadership roles.²³

In the United States in 1944, Conservative evangelical Christians formed the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) as an alternative to the more liberal Federal Council of Churches (renamed the National Council of Churches). In 1945 the Mennonite Brethren became the only Mennonite body to join this organization. While the initial impulse among Mennonite Brethren for joining the NAE came from the Board of Foreign Missions, one of the three reasons given for joining this organization was "to support morally the stand against modernism."²⁴

In the years following, this initial decision was affirmed in several ways. In 1954 the General Conference voted subsidies to reduce the NAE debt. In 1968 after the 1954 division of the Mennonite Brethren into two conferences, the United States Conference voted to become an official member of the NAE.²⁵

During the forties and fifties, a number of Christian Leader articles were supportive of the Mennonite Brethren affiliation with the NAE. Citing Carl McIntire, the combative fundamentalist, Elmo Warkentin linked the Federal Council of Churches with a Communist conspiracy. Federal Council leaders such as E. Stanley Jones, George A. Butterick and Harry E. Fosdick, were cited for their support of Russia, socialism, and their rejection of the deity of Christ. Conversely, the NAE was praised for its promotion of evangelical truth and resistance to modernism.²⁶

Other Christian Leader articles expressed a similar perspective, hinting at Communist connections in the World Council of Churches and endorsing the NAE for its support of the historic Christian faith.²⁷ The Mennonite Brethren objections to liberal organizations and support for fundamentalism, evangelicalism, and the NAE must be seen in a context. Not only did the Mennonite Brethren side with the NAE in its resistance to modernism but they identified with fundamentalism's crusade against Communism. As German immigrants from Russia, the Mennonite Brethren had reasons to dislike Communism and were easily caught up in the tensions of the Cold War years.

In a number of other ways, the Mennonite Brethren became identified with fundamentalism and dispensationalism. During the 1930s and early 1940s, Tabor College displayed a fundamentalist orientation. For years the annual Bible Conference featured a number of nationally known fundamentalist/evangelical speakers including R. A. Torrey, J. A. Huggman, William Evans, Kenneth Kantzer and Leonard Lewis. In addition, A. E. Janzen, Tabor's third president (1935-1942), was a staunch premillennialist. Outspoken dispensationalists on the faculty during this era include William Bestvater and P. R. Lange.²⁸

The fundamentalist orientation of Tabor College and its constituency could be seen in the suspicions directed toward its fourth president, P. E. Schellenberg (1942-1951). Questions about P. E. Schellenberg arose because he had a Ph.D. in psychology from a secular institution and because he had more Anabaptist leanings. People questioned whether an individual who was not a minister could give spiritual direction to the college.²⁹ In a 1947 article

entitled, "How to Detect the First Signs of Modernism," Arthur Willems expresses concern that modernism could possibly creep into Tabor College. According to Willems the first signs of modernism can be detected in educational institutions because "Satan makes the school his special object of attack."³⁰

During the 1940s and 1950s the Mennonite Brethren evidenced a fundamentalist orientation by adopting a fundamentalist agenda. The brotherhood became willing partners with the fundamentalists in their crusade against modernism and Communism. An interest in such an agenda can be illustrated by the articles published in the Christian Leader and The Voice. Some examples include "Mennonitism and Modernism," "What is Modernism and How Can It Be Detected?," "The Marks of a Modernist," "Some Recent Literature on the Recent 'Fundamentalist Controversy,'" and the previously mentioned article, "How to Detect the First Signs of Modernism."³¹

In some of these articles, the Mennonite Brethren clearly identify themselves as fundamentalists. For example, in "Mennonitism and Modernism" Walfried Dirks of Northend M. B. Church in Winnipeg refers to the Mennonite Brethren "as Mennonites and fundamentalists."³²

In other ways, the Mennonite Brethren adopted the fundamentalist/dispensational agenda. A series of articles in the Christian Leader entitled "Evangelism and 'The New Version'" attempt to inform Mennonite Brethren regarding the validity of the "Revised Standard Version" of the Bible.³³ Other articles strongly endorse the premillennial/pretribulational position on eschatology and suggest that post-millennialism is a mark of modernism and socialism.³⁴

According to Wesley Prieb, as the 1940s opened approximately ninety-percent of the Mennonite Brethren would, in varying degrees, identify themselves as fundamentalists. This figure, however, must be modified by several factors. Many Mennonite Brethren who would call themselves fundamentalists still upheld the peace position. Also, in 1940 the term fundamentalism did not have the negative connotation that it has today. Moreover, at this time Anabaptism had not yet been clearly defined and a moderate evangelicalism, somewhere between fundamentalism and liberalism, was

just emerging.³⁵ Therefore, the Mennonite Brethren found it easy to slip into the fundamentalist camp.

By the mid-1960s a revival of interest in Mennonite history and theology was underway in Mennonite Brethren circles. This Anabaptist renewal occurred primarily after 1960 and is not a subject for this paper. Nevertheless, the roots of this renewal could be found in the decades of the forties and fifties.

The Anabaptist identity began to take shape with the publication in 1944 of Harold S. Bender's influential work, "The Anabaptist Vision."³⁶ While this article, which has since become a classic, had little immediate impact in Mennonite Brethren circles, it laid the ground work throughout American Mennonitism for a recovery of the Anabaptist heritage. Its influence has been immense.

World War II and the draft forced many Mennonite Brethren to examine their historical and theological roots. The reality of a world torn by war made the Mennonite peace position and Anabaptist concept of service more relevant. Young men had to choose between the regular military service, Civilian Public Service (CPS), or non-combatant service. According to Wesley Prieb, the young men who entered the CPS were exposed to other Mennonite traditions and ideas. This process helped to develop an interest in Mennonite history and values, a step that preceded the more institutional movement toward Anabaptism that would come later.³⁷

In the early 1940s, Tabor College has been described as a "Dallas (Theological Seminary) controlled school." The president, A. E. Janzen's "entire (theological) system was wrapped around the premillennial view" of eschatology. But a slow shift began to take place. Janzen himself upheld the peace position and was active in promoting Mennonite Central Committee relief programs. During the war years, The Peace Club was active and vigorous discussions in this regard took place. Two presidents, P. E. Schellenberg (1942-1951) and Frank C. Peters (1954-1956) had Anabaptist leanings and promoted the peace position and relief efforts.³⁸

Vernon Wiebe says that many Mennonite Brethren in the 1940s were "one issue people--the social gospel versus fundamentalism." During the forties few Mennonite Brethren would "dare to challenge premillennialism." But even by the late 1940s some Mennonite Brethren began to realize "that fundamentalism depended too much on human knowledge."³⁹ The human mind could not know everything. The scope of human history did not necessarily fit the neat and tidy dispensational scheme of things.

During the 1950s Mennonite Brethren publications began to focus more on the historic Anabaptist-Mennonite distinctives. At the forefront of this endeavor was John A. Toews. He lamented the identity crises that the Mennonite Brethren were experiencing and believed that the answer to this problem was a return to Anabaptist roots and a close relationship with other Mennonite groups.⁴⁰ Twenty years before the 1975 publication of his major work, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, his articles articulated a clear Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective of history.⁴¹

In the late fifties other voices spoke out for the Anabaptist renewal. Articles in the Christian Leader and The Voice by Frank C. Peters, Cornelius Wall, Orlando Harms, and Clarence Bauman promoted the Mennonite peace position.⁴² Included in several articles by Henry H. Dick is a focus on the brotherhood's Anabaptist roots and several Anabaptist principles such as nonconformity and discipleship.⁴³ While G. W. Peters was not known for his strong Anabaptist stance, he did write several articles that alerted the constituency to its historic Anabaptist-Mennonite roots.⁴⁴

The Canadian Mennonite Brethren had less problems in restoring their Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage, largely because they had not departed from such roots to the extent that their counterparts in the United States had. Substantial numbers of Mennonite Brethren did not come to Canada until the 1920s. By now the tensions with other Mennonites associated with the succession of 1860 had largely been healed. Also, the difficulties associated with the Russian Revolution encouraged Mennonites of all stripes to close ranks. Thus, the Canadian Mennonite Brethren maintained closer ties with

other Mennonite groups than had their brethren in the United States.⁴⁵

Several other factors facilitated the Anabaptist renewal in Canada. Of considerable importance, the Canadian Mennonite Brethren did not feel the influence of fundamentalism and dispensationalism to the extent that their counterparts in the United States did.⁴⁶ As a consequence, the repercussions of the fundamentalist-modernist fight were less in Canada. Also, such dispensational doctrines as premillennialism had less force in Canada.

Second, the cultural-political situation in Canada lent itself to a stronger Mennonite identity. The Canadian Mennonite Brethren had less exposure to the forces of acculturation than have the United States Mennonite Brethren. Several factors retarded the acculturation of the Canadian Mennonite Brethren. They arrived in North America fifty years later than had the United States Brethren. They maintained the German language barrier several decades longer. The Canadian national setting has nurtured the existence of an ethno-religious pluralism, thus permitting groups such as the Mennonite Brethren to maintain their cultural identity. The Canadian Mennonite Brethren did not have to choose between being Canadians and Mennonites. The World War I experience made it difficult for Mennonites in the United States to be good Americans, Germans, and Mennonites at the same time.⁴⁷

Paul Toews tells us that "a reclamation of Mennonite history and identity did take place among the U. S. Mennonite Brethren." He points to two institutions, Pacific Bible Institute and the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary as the two sources for this renewal. From the openings of Pacific Bible Institute in 1944 and the seminary in 1955, these institutions were dominated by fundamentalist-dispensationalist influences. In fact, part of the rationale for starting Pacific was that Tabor, which already had experienced some Anabaptist stirrings, was perceived as "too liberal."⁴⁸

However, this situation would change by the early and mid 1960s. In 1960 Arthur J. Wiebe became president of Pacific Bible Institute. Not only did he turn this institution into a liberal arts college, but he facilitated a

Mennonite revival by recruiting faculty members with a strong Anabaptist perspective. The process of changing the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary from a "miniature Dallas Theological Seminary" to an Anabaptist institution began in 1964 when J. B. Toews assumed the presidency. Again, the heart of this process was his hiring of a faculty and administration that was committed to the Anabaptist vision.⁴⁹

How successful this Anabaptist-Mennonite renaissance has been in the United States remains open to question. On one hand, fundamentalist and dispensational views no longer hold sway at any of the major Mennonite Brethren institutions. In fact, in most Mennonite Brethren schools the term fundamentalist is one of disrepute. Also, the seminary, whose faculty are largely Canadians, still maintains a strong Anabaptist stance. Moreover, today most Mennonite Brethren probably have a better awareness of their history and beliefs. On the other hand, moderate evangelicalism has certainly made its inroads in both the Mennonite Brethren educational institutions and churches. The Anabaptist revival has come at a time of extensive ideological and cultural pluralism and does not seem to have had an extensive impact on the churches.

III

The patterns of leadership in the Mennonite Brethren churches in the United States underwent significant changes during the years from 1940 to the early 1950s. The churches in Canada experienced similar transitions two decades later, from about 1961 to 1971. The major change was the move from a multiple lay ministry to the single-pastor professional ministry. A second related shift was from the ordained deacon to the elected deacon. Another resulting transition concerned a subtle shift in interpreting Scripture--from an exegetical community to the seminary and Board of Reference and Council.

These transitions must be seen as but an aspect of the acculturation that the Mennonite Brethren experienced in North America. Especially important was the language change, urbanization, a rising level of education, and increased contacts with non-Mennonite religious groups. The heightening

of Mennonite distinctives that took place in Mennonite Brethren ranks during the middle years of the twentieth century can be seen as a return to historic Anabaptism. But the changes in respect to the ministry and the interpretation of Scripture cannot be regarded as such. They run counter to Anabaptist principles.

The details of these transitions, especially the shift to the single pastor, are difficult to document. In keeping with the congregational polity of the Mennonite Brethren, it was a matter for the local church, not the general conference. By 1951 the resolutions of the general conference take for granted the existence of salaried pastors. Beyond specifications on how to select and discipline a pastor, little was said about the matter on the conference level.⁵⁰ John A. Toews also notes the lack of church records regarding this issue.⁵¹ In research for his history of the Southern District, Orlando Harms indicates that even the minutes of individual churches say little about the matter. The change to the single pastor system "just happened."⁵²

Beneath this official silence, however, there were often struggles, pitting those favoring the transition to the single pastor model against those who wished to retain the lay multi pastoral system. These tensions and attitudes can best be captured by means of oral history and letters.

The early Anabaptists maintained the doctrines of the priesthood of believers and the congregational church polity. They did not consider the "ministry of the Word" to be a function of a special ecclesiastical profession. Instead, they regarded as ministers those individuals who had been called by the church to this office, even if they lacked special training. Moreover, these ministers and teachers were not to lord it over the congregation, for they had no authority but to preach the Word and administer discipline. The church had only one head--Jesus Christ.⁵³

Among the leaders of the 1860 succession, that is, the eighteen "founding fathers," none were ordained ministers or deacons. This renewal movement emphasized the priesthood of the believer and sought the active

participation of all members of the congregation. What emerged was a congregational polity with an unsalaried, multiple lay ministry. The pulpit work was a shared ministry, with most of the preachers being drawn from the teaching profession, though few of them prior to World War I had any formal theological training.⁵⁴

In North America the Mennonite Brethren preserved the unsalaried multiple lay ministry. Both the congregational and denominational leaders came from within the local congregation. The training was done primarily by the local congregation, which indoctrinated future leaders with Scriptural principles.⁵⁵ The call to the ministry came because the congregation recognized the gifts of a particular individual, who more often than not came from the farming and teaching vocations. Several individuals within each congregation shared in the ministry of the Word.⁵⁶

But this would all change. By the late 1930s a process began that would transform the leadership pattern in the United States to the single salaried pastor. The church in Buhler had a salaried pastor by 1930. By 1836 the Hillsboro Mennonite Brethren Church had introduced the pastoral system. From 1836 to 1943 at least five Mennonite Brethren churches in the midwest adopted the pastoral system. Between 1940 and 1945 at least seven congregations in the Pacific District made the transition to the single pastoral system. By the early 1950s nearly all Mennonite Brethren churches in the United States had shifted from the multiple lay ministry to the single pastoral system.⁵⁷

This change came about largely for pragmatic reasons. According to John A. Toews, the issue of the single pastoral system received little discussion in principle "within the context of New Testament teaching. . . or the Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage." The arguments within individual Mennonite Brethren Churches for or against this system were primarily practical in nature.⁵⁸

The general acceptance of American culture since 1874 precipitated such an alteration. More specifically, the change to the pastoral system was accelerated by the transition from German to English in worship services and

by the general rise of the educational level among church members. According to Frank Epp, the Mennonites in the United States assumed, to a greater degree than those in Russia and Canada, that the linguistic and cultural forms of Mennonitism could be changed without great danger to the content of their religion.⁵⁹ Therefore by 1935, which James Juhnke calls the "critical year" of language change, most families in the United States with growing children had ceased the habitual use of German. Most churches had made the transition from German to English by 1950.⁶⁰

As a consequence of the language change, a higher level of education, and the influence of outside religious groups, the Mennonite Brethren began to desire well trained preachers who could communicate in English. Such a demand encouraged ministers to study outside the fellowship, where they brought back new ideas in respect to church polity. When they received such theological training, especially at the seminary level, they were not inclined to accept positions as part time unsalaried lay pastors. Such men usually wanted salaried pastorates. If the Mennonite Brethren did not provide such a position, the Baptists would.⁶¹

Other pragmatic considerations played a role in the pastoral change. Some people desired "better preaching." (However, there is some question whether the salaried pastors were a significant improvement.) Others believed that the pastoral system would be a "more effective ministry." Still, other people believed that better trained pastors who spoke English could best retain the young people in the church. Also, in the urban centers a full time pastor could better meet the churches' counseling and visitation needs.⁶²

While a majority of the Mennonite Brethren in the United States supported the new system, voices spoke out against the change--some with considerable bitterness. The intensity of these objections varied from congregation to congregation, but they usually centered on practical matters not theological issues. The subjects of the pastor's salary, vacation, and professionalism often came to the forefront. Some objected to paying a pastor, others accepted the principal of a salaried pastor but questioned the

amount of the remuneration. Especially objectionable was when a potential pastor made the matter of salary an issue.⁶³

In the context of the 1940s and 1950s, the thought of a pastor taking a vacation provoked some church members. A poem submitted to the Christian Leader in 1943 may have caught such a spirit. A small portion of the poem would read like this:

"Would the farmer leave his cattle
Or the shepherd leave his sheep?
Who would give them care or shelter,
Or provide them food to eat?
So it strikes me very sing'lar,
When a man of holy hands
Thinks he needs to have a vacation
And forsake his tender lambs,"

"Did St. Paul get such a notion?
Did a Wesley or a Knox?
Did they in the heat of summer,
Turn from their own needy flocks?
Did they shut up their meeting
Just to go and lounge about?"⁶⁴

The fact that ten years later the Christian Leader had to run an article supporting a pastor's need for a vacation is some evidence that the issue had not entirely gone away.⁶⁵

Three other tendencies emerged. While accepting the principle of a salaried pastor, church members rejected the idea that the pastor should approach his job as if it were another profession. Also, the pastor was not to do his job alone. There may be a single pastor but the laity were still quite active, providing some semblance of a shared ministry.⁶⁶ Third, Mennonite Brethren had high expectations for their pastors. Christian Leader articles elaborating on the job of a minister present a demanding if not

impossible job description.⁶⁷ One is left with the impression that if the Mennonite Brethren were going to pay their pastors, they were determined to get their money's worth.

The transition to the single pastoral system came about two decades later in Canada and is thus not a subject for this paper, except as its background relates to the 1940s and 1950s. Prior to 1960, only about twenty-five percent of the Canadian Mennonite Brethren enjoyed a full time pastor. Nevertheless, the idea of the salaried pastor was well rooted by 1960. The same forces that propelled the United States Mennonite Brethren along this path--urbanization, the language change, increased contacts with outside religious groups, and an improved level of education--facilitated the rise of the pastoral system in Canada. After 1961 the change came swiftly.⁶⁸

However, in Canada the transition to the pastoral system came later and was not as complete as in the United States. The large scale immigration of Mennonite Brethren from Russia to Canada in the 1920s has had a dramatic affect on Mennonite Brethren church life. The late arrival meant that the language change came later in Canada. This fact helped reduce the acculturation of the Canadian Mennonite Brethren, including their desire for a full time, salaried pastor who would preach in English.⁶⁹ Moreover, among the Russländer were many who had been church leaders in Russia. These gifted individuals provided leadership in the Canadian churches strengthening the concept of the lay ministry for years to come. Furthermore, the Canadian Mennonite Brethren placed considerable emphasis on bible school training, a factor that also produced an abundance of lay leaders for the church.⁷⁰

Like the situation in the United States, the Mennonite Brethren in Canada turned to the salaried pastorate for practical reasons--better preaching, more efficient ministry, and a better community outreach. Nevertheless, some individuals believed that the multiple system was more biblical and that the lay preachers were less prone to seek popular approval. As a result of these arguments and the factors delaying the transition, the Canadian Mennonite Brethren have demonstrated more reluctance to accept the

new pastoral system.⁷¹

The 1940s and 1950s saw another transition in Mennonite Brethren church life. The office of the deacon changed from an ordained position to one elected for a set term. In Russia and the earlier years in North America, deacons were elected and ordained by the congregation for life. But several questions arose: Why was the deacon ordained for life when other church officers were not? In the New Testament, was a person selected to the office for a specific service and time duration, or for life?⁷²

These and other questions prompted the Mennonite Brethren to examine the role and function of the deacon. As a result, by the 1970s very few churches in the United States and about half in Canada ordained deacons for life. Instead, most deacons were elected for a term of several years.⁷³

Wes Prieb sees this change related to the transition to the new pastoral pattern. The ordained deacon was the "cornerstone of lay leadership" in the Mennonite Brethren churches. Being there for life, the deacon "represented continuity in lay leadership, more power to the congregation," stability, and support for the pastor. On the other hand, the elected deacon did not bring the same level of commitment or the same quality of leadership. Like the salaried pastor, they were something of a "revolving door."⁷⁴

Despite the shift to the single pastoral system, the Mennonite Brethren have retained more lay involvement in the church than have many religious denominations. The Kauffman and Harder study of the early 1970s demonstrated that slightly more than fifty percent of the Mennonite Brethren still participated in some form of the shared ministry (e.g., Sunday school teacher, committee member, deacon).⁷⁵

Nevertheless, the years around the middle of the twentieth century witnessed a shift of authority in the Mennonite Brethren church. Decisions on faith and lifestyle in the Mennonite Brethren fellowship, in theory at least, had rested on a brotherhood process, i.e., the interpretation of Scripture emerges out of a wide consensus. With the coming of the pastoral system, decisions on the theological matters began to be made by the professionally

trained leaders, with the seminary and Board of Reference and Council wielding considerable influence. By the later twentieth century, the Mennonite Brethren had moved from an exegetical community with the center of power in the congregation to a religious denomination run more on the corporate model.⁷⁶

IV

The 1950s witnessed two changes in the structure of the Mennonite Brethren church of North America. In 1954 the conference reorganized into two area conferences, each with its respective districts. In 1960 the on again, off again relationship of the Mennonite Brethren and the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren finally culminated in a merger of the two groups.

The Mennonite Brethren, from the very beginning, have shown a remarkable propensity for conference organization and conference work. By 1872, only twelve years after their origin, the Mennonite Brethren founded a conference. This development came eleven years before even the Mennonite churches in Russia organized an official conference in 1883.⁷⁷

Five years after the first migration to North America, the first duly constituted Mennonite Brethren Conference met in 1879. John A. Toews has described the growth of the General Conference in North America in four stages. In regard to conference structure, the years from 1879 to 1909 were generally characterized by centralization. Conference work during this period was naturally limited, consisting primarily of the beginning activities in missions, education, and publications. In the next phase (1909-1924), the conference was divided into several districts and until 1954 the fellowship functioned in a more decentralized manner. Under this arrangement, conference responsibilities were divided between the general conference and districts.⁷⁸

The third phase (1924-1954) saw a significant redistribution of Mennonite Brethren membership. By 1924 Hillsboro was the "New Jerusalem" of the Mennonite Brethren world, the undisputed center of General Conference activity. Located in Hillsboro were Tabor College, the only Mennonite Brethren institution of higher learning, and the conference publishing house.

Moreover, the largest concentration of Mennonite Brethren in North America could be found in the Southern District.⁷⁹ But this would change during the next thirty years. As a result of the influx of Russländer beginning in the 1920s, the Northern District (Canadian Conference) grew dramatically, and by 1951 its membership surpassed that of the other three conferences together. The Depression had a scattering affect on the Mennonite Brethren within the United States, encouraging many of them to move to the West coast. As a result, by 1953 the membership of the Pacific District surpassed that of the Southern District.⁸⁰

These new demographic realities brought about a reorganization in the General Conference. The demographic shift had not been reflected in the conference representation, policy, and organization. Thereafter, tensions developed between Mennonite Brethren in Canada and the United States and between the Pacific and Southern Districts in the United States.⁸¹ Mennonite Brethren in Canada and the Pacific Conference insisted on a conference structure more in harmony with the new population distribution.

In particular, the tensions centering around the operation of Mennonite Brethren institutions and agencies fostered the "constitutional crisis" of 1954, which resulted in a reorganization of the General Conference. Educational efforts began to be polarized. Mennonite Brethren in Canada and the Pacific District felt the need for institutions of theological training in their area. Thus, in 1944 two new Mennonite Brethren institutions of higher learning opened--the Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg and the Pacific Bible Institute.⁸²

Other developments caused the Canadians to desire a separate conference. The preservation of German for two decades longer in Canada reinforced the polarization between the United States and Canadian conferences. Canadians complained about the lack news coverage on subjects of interest to them by the Zionsbote and Christian Leader. Therefore, they established their own publishing house in Winnipeg and by 1962 began to issue the Mennonite Brethren Herald as the official publication of the Canadian Mennonite Brethren

Conference. Furthermore, in 1946 the Ontario Conference of Mennonite Brethren joined the Northern District (Canadian Conference). This further strengthened the Canadian Mennonite Brethren in respect to size, education, evangelicalism and home missions.⁸³

The questions brought about by the numerical growth of the Canadian Mennonite Brethren and the operation of conference agencies and publications culminated in the "constitutional crisis" of 1954. At the meeting of the General Conference in Hillsboro in 1954, the concept of the "area conferences" emerged. By 1953 the Canadians had already made certain activities area conference responsibilities: higher education, youth work, home missions and church schools (including Sunday schools). They were going to cooperate with the General Conference only in respect to foreign missions, relief, Committee of Reference and Counsel and the Board of Trustees. At this meeting the General Conference structure was reorganized to constitute two area conferences, the United States and Canadian. Each of these national conferences contained sub-divisions--districts in the United States and provincial conferences in Canada, which still enjoy a measure of independence.⁸⁴

The second structural change concerned the 1960 merger of the Mennonite Brethren and Krimmer Mennonite Brethren conferences. The Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church began in the Crimea, Russia in 1869. Their founder and early leader was Jacob A. Wiebe (1836-1921). This new church stressed conversion, baptism by immersion, church discipline, nonconformity, nonresistance, refusal of the oath, and feet-washing. The Krimmer Mennonite Brethren left the Crimea in 1874 for America. They were the first church body to leave Russia in the 1870s for America, establishing their center in the village of Gnadenau, near Hillsboro. The group expanded into other areas of Kansas, South Dakota, Saskatchewan and California with the two main centers being Kansas and South Dakota.⁸⁵

The lengthy courtship of the Mennonite Brethren and the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren was an occasional process that went clear back to Russia.

In the United States overtures toward merger continued for over eighty years with several obstacles arising to prevent a denominational union. One hinderance was the mode of baptism: the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren practiced forward immersion rather than backward as performed by the Mennonite Brethren. The Krimmer Mennonite Brethren were also reluctant to merge with the Mennonite Brethren because of the later group's position on the millennium and their contacts with the Baptists. Also, the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren did not want to be swallowed up and became a small part of a larger group.⁸⁶

Nevertheless, as time went on the two groups developed a close inter-church fellowship and cooperative working relationships in several areas. By the time of World War II, their differences had nearly disappeared. The Gnadenau Church lead the movement toward merger. Yet the difficulty of merging the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren mission programs, which were operating under a number of mission boards, with the Mennonite Brethren Conference still presented an obstacle. In 1949 the Mennonite Brethren reactivated negotiations and pursued the possibility of a merger. In 1952 and 1953 the Krimmer Brethren responded negatively to these overtures, voting not to merge.⁸⁷

However, in 1954 the Gnadenau Church withdrew from the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren and joined the Mennonite Brethren conference. The loss of the founding Krimmer Mennonite Brethren church in North America prompted more unified action on the part of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren conference. Other Krimmer Mennonite Brethren churches joined the move to unite with the Mennonite Brethren. In 1957 the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Conference voted by a two-thirds majority to merge with the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church. The plan toward union was approved by the Mennonite Brethren in 1958 and 1959, and the official merger took place in 1960 in Reedley, California.⁸⁸

V

This paper has addressed three ecclesiological developments in the Mennonite Brethren church--the fundamentalist-Anabaptist issue, the

transitions in church leadership, and the changes in the conference structure. These developments were significant and in varying degrees left their permanent imprint on Mennonite Brethren church life. Yet, Mennonite Brethren differ in their acceptance of these changes, often viewing them as a mixed bag.

As noted earlier, the attempt to bring about an Anabaptist-Mennonite revival has been met with only partial success. The Anabaptist-Mennonite renaissance has come at a time of weakening denominational distinctives and loyalties throughout the United States. Many Mennonite Brethren feel quite at home in the theological hodgepodge which makes up modern evangelicalism. Sharp theological distinctives are not at home in a day when ideological pluralism reigns supreme. Thus Mennonite Brethren, particularly in the United States, will probably continue to live with a muddled theological situation.

The shift to the pastoral system was an inevitable aspect of acculturation. Despite recent attempts to resurrect aspects of the multiple lay ministry, the salaried pastoral system is here to stay. In the larger churches, the multiple staff is replacing the single pastor, but it is still a professional ministry. In a day of urbanization when both spouses work, there is little time to labor in the vineyard of the church. Instead, we hire surrogates--the professional minister.

The restructuring of the denomination in 1954 was also inevitable. It began trends that have continued--namely a shift of power in Mennonite Brethren ranks from the United States to Canada and within the United States from the midwest to the west coast. Hillsboro, once the "Mecca" of the Mennonite Brethren world, now has a much reduced role in conference affairs. These trends will continue, with the United States Conference becoming even more of a junior partner in the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches.

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