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A VISION FOR THE ROLE OF MENNONITE BRETHERN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN MENNONITE BRETHERN IDENTITY FORMATION

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This paper has two purposes: 1) to affirm the significance of teaching of Anabaptist-Mennonite history in the educational institutions of the Mennonite Brethren Church, and 2) to publicly share a vision paper drafted for the US Area Board of Higher Education during the Spring of 1972.

The Mennonite Brethren Church is a Christian community in quest of a theological and churchly identity in the modern world. The roots of the current identity crisis are deeply imbedded in the mixed Mennonite Brethren character, which represents the confluence of three major and sometimes conflicting socio-theological movements in Reformation and modern church history--Anabaptism, German Lutheran Pietism and American Fundamentalism. The historic bases of the identity crisis have been intensified in recent times by the following other forces: 1) a growing loss of historical consciousness in response to acculturation pressures. The press to bed down in middle American culture, to conform, has led to a quest for religious anonymity in the hope that facelessness would relieve deep seated feelings of cultural-religious inferiority. The preoccupation to be American evangelicals has often had as its correlate the desire to reduce the clarity of Anabaptist-Mennonite identity. 2) A growing confusion about theological identity in the face of massive exposure to popular forms of American Christianity. Indiscriminate courtship, in some cases even marriage, with every popular wind of evangelical doctrine and movement has resulted in theological rootlessness and niavete. 3) The collapse of rural ethnic communities in the process of growing urbanization and professionalization. 4) The absence of clearly discernable and authoritative church leaders whom the people, sometimes only instinctively, recognize and accept because they know the whence, why and direction of the Mennonite Brethren brotherhood in a rapidly changing cultural and churchly scene. 5) The uncritical acceptance of the western myth of the generation gap which pits young against old, and idolizes the young while rejecting the old.

Unfortunately, the educational institutions of the Mennonite Brethren Church have contributed to the current crisis in the following ways: 1) they have failed to focus clearly the question of Anabaptist-Mennonite identity for their students. The general education programs of the colleges, that core of the curriculum which says the most about institutional objectives for the students, encourage knowledge of world history in general and more narrow slices of history in particular but not Anabaptist-Mennonite history which is the history of many students and the value identification of the schools. Courses in a variety of subjects are viewed as more important, based on frequency of offerings and numbers of students enrolled, than courses in Anabaptist-Mennonite history. The result has been the graduation of several generations of Mennonite Brethren constituents uninformed of their own history and unclear about their own theological and churchly identity. This problem has been seriously compounded by ongoing flirtations with popular forms of American Christianity which contradict major dimensions of Anabaptist-Mennonite faith and community. Thus

the educational institutions of the brotherhood have contributed to theological rootlessness instead of shaping a clear theological identity for the people they serve. 2) The schools have not consciously practiced the discernment of the gifts of leadership in the church in their employment policies. Other criteria, some of them highly unanabaptist, have governed staff selection. Consequently, the schools have not contributed to the selection of authoritative and trusted leaders in the church, e.g. men like H. W. Lohrenz, P. C. Hiebert, A. H. Unruh, etc. 3) The schools have contributed to the generational divisions within the church by concentrating their educational efforts on the young and by saying different things to the young than they were prepared to say to their parents and elders in the churches.

The first thesis of this essay is that responsibility for the theological clarity and identity of the Mennonite Brethren Church rests with its educational leaders and institutions. It must be lodged there because the schools were founded for this purpose and are the primary resource in the church for this reflective task. A review of the types of Christian colleges in North America should help to clarify the intended character of Mennonite Brethren post-secondary schools.

There are two bases for the Christian college in American culture. The first, which can be called the commonwealth college, was founded in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts during the sixteenth century for the purpose of perpetuating the Christian commonwealth and humanizing the world. The Christian college was created by the state, albeit it a "Christian state," to serve the purposes of the state, and was thus responsible to the commonwealth. The mission of this type of Christian college was to "civilize the wilderness" for the state and "Christianize the civilization" for the church. Out of this vision there has emerged the secular university which opts for the first half of the original vision, "the cultururation of the wilderness," and the classical Christian college which strives to "Christianize the culture" on the assumption that the cosmic Lordship of Jesus Christ calls for the subordination and integration of all culture within theological categories.

The second type of Christian college also is rooted in the sixteenth century and may be called the "sectarian college." It emerged out of the radical reformation's concern for the people of God in contradistinction to the citizens of this world, for the Christian communities who understand themselves to have a particular historical-theological consciousness and distinctive values and life-styles. The college was founded by the believers church to serve that church in the world. That means 1) the college belongs to the church, not the state or Christian commonwealth; 2) education focuses on transmitting the particular historical-theological consciousness and distinctive faith and values of the people of God and by the vision of the church for the world. The task of the sectarian college is to affirm the vision of the church, refine it, amplify and develop it for new settings and issues, and to proclaim and elucidate it for all generations of the church, especially the younger generation.

The colleges and seminary of the Mennonite Brethren Church are "sectarian institutions" designed to focus the identity of the church in the pluralistic society of North American culture and to transmit that identity to the young as well as older generations in the church. In other words, the purpose of these schools is not to increase knowledge for knowledge sake, e.g. to civilize the wilderness, or to Christianize the general shape of pagan American society, e.g. to Christianize the culture, which is the mission of public higher education

and the classical Christian college respectively. Rather, the mission of Mennonite Brethren post-secondary institutions of education is to maintain, clarify and transmit the identity of a specific group of God's people. The vision and the mission must be Mennonite Brethren peoplehood, the socio-theological identity of the Mennonite Brethren church in the modern world.

The second major thesis of this paper is that the vision and the mission call for the re-focusing of educational objectives more precisely upon churchly identity and renewal. Specifically, this vision proposes a mission with two foci: 1) the schools of the Mennonite Brethren Church must become centers of Christian renewal inspired and informed by Biblical Studies and Anabaptist heritage and 2) the schools must reconceptualize their mission to include the identity and renewal of the entire church rather than simply the education of the next generation.

The first dimension of the vision necessitates only minimal elaboration. The Mennonite Brethren Church always has viewed the Bible as authoritative, although it has taken its authority more seriously in questions of theology than in matters of lifestyle. There is thus an historic openness to the Bible, but that historic openness must be revitalized for two reasons: 1) Bible reading and knowledge is on the decline, as I read our constituency, and unfaithfulness to the teachings of Scripture is on the increase. While many factors underlie both observations, they are due in part to the presumption that we know what the Bible says and to the perception that the Bible calls for changes (repentance) we are not interested in. Thus, in one sense, the Bible has been domesticated; it has become so much a part of our history that we take it for granted and/or ignore it. 2) While Mennonite Brethren familiarity has been domesticating the Bible, biblical scholarship has been developing profoundly new and challenging insights into the nature of biblical faith which is significantly altering, and in some cases revolutionizing, our understandings of the biblical tradition. Motivated in large measure by massive new manuscript finds and new methods of studying the Bible, this new biblical scholarship has sparked and undergirded world-wide renewal movements in contexts considered closed to authentic biblical teaching and faith by American evangelicals, i.e. the Roman Catholic Church and many mainline Protestant churches. It is inconceivable that the Mennonite Brethren Church with its historical affirmation of biblical authority and faith should be by-passed by the renewal of biblical scholarship and the renewal of Christian faith grounded in a fresh reading and understanding of the biblical message. Or is it?

Similar statements could be made about the recovery of the Anabaptist heritage. The 1940's saw a scholarly "recovery of the Anabaptist vision" as a radical movement of discipleship, congregational faithfulness to Jesus and the early Christians in theology, lifestyle and missions. But that recovery of the sixteenth century vision of our forefathers has remained walled up in Mennonite archives. It is time that the "recovery of the vision" become incarnated in the shape and life of our congregations and people.

Biblical and historical scholarship has and is giving us new and fresh understandings of what it means to be faithful to our self-affirmed source of faith and to our own history. The task facing the Mennonite Brethren Church in its quest for an identity is to integrate anew the message of Jesus and his disciples, and the intention of our history, with our faith and lifestyle in the contemporary world.

The second dimension of the vision proposes that the schools of the Mennonite Brethren Church self-consciously assume responsibility to foster and nurture the renewal movement inspired by biblical studies and the Anabaptist heritage for the entire Mennonite Brethren Church. Two issues are at stake here. 1) The schools should become centers of a vital and living biblical-Anabaptist faith and lifestyle. Radical discipleship, covenant community, binding and loosing, discernment of the spirits and the gifts of the Spirit, brotherly love and kindness, evangelization, and the many other attributes of a biblical-Anabaptist community must be taught and practiced on the campuses. This kind of teaching program and lifestyle should become the priority agenda of our schools because that was the intention of their founding and because Christian renewal in our time is in desperate search for authentic models of biblical faith. The current identity crisis in the church is a mark of the schools' failure to fulfill the founding visions which gave birth to them due to a loss of the original vision and to a substitution of other priorities. The crisis is also a clarion call for the schools to reaffirm and reassume responsibility for denominational identity in a changing world.

The theoretical reflection on and clarification of Anabaptist identity must be accompanied by a living incarnation of the articulated vision. Our times are as interested in the how as in the what and the why. A theological recovery of biblical-Anabaptist faith and lifestyle, which is absolutely essential, must give birth to new, viable and testable models of faithful congregational life. The task of model building must begin on the campuses where there is a willing and a free spirit to experiment and test new models.

2) The schools should become centers for the dissemination of a biblical-Anabaptist faith and lifestyle of the churches of the Mennonite Brethren constituency and beyond. In other words, the schools need to redefine their student bodies to include the entire church. This should be done because the churches founded and continue to support the schools. It should be done for the following reasons as well:

a) It is time to challenge the philosophy of the education which views college and seminary education as a prerequisite to employability. Education should be viewed as a lifelong process which is the right of everyone as an enrichment of life. This reconceptualization of the educational task is especially necessary in Christian education which claims the name of a church that affirms the equality of all people before God and the priesthood of all believers.

b) There are good grounds for challenging the assumptions of American education that the most educable people are the youth who are confronted with their own unique and massive agenda, e.g. self-understanding, self-definition, sexual definition and marriage, etc. Centuries ago the Greek philosopher Plato contended that such people are only capable of learning facts, not ideas. The latter must be left to more mature people. Mennonite educators, who come from a heritage stressing adult and voluntary faith, could profit from a reassessment of their undue concern for the education of the 18-22 year old and their neglect of the 22-80 year old.

c) Mennonite educators are in a good position to entertain such thoughts because the youth culture itself is beginning to question the validity of a neatly packaged educational program for the 18-22 year old and the 22-80 year old are showing increasing hunger for and interest in a program of continued study and stimulation.

d) The schools of the church are under obligation to say the same things to all elements of the Christian community if the entire church is to grow and if the problem of the generation gap is to be minimized rather than maximized by the educational community. And I suspect that all of us educators will be pleasantly surprised to learn that "dad" and "mom" are amazingly receptive to the "new ideas" we introduce to the young with the hope and the prayer that they will not talk at home, provided, of course, that our approach is humble, loving, and sensitive to their levels of understanding and experience.

In very simple words, this means the schools must relate themselves honestly to the ongoing life of the churches so that through the input of biblical teaching and historical study the faith and lifestyle of the churches may be renewed in vitality and faithfulness. The congregations of the Mennonite Brethren constituency must become the central focus of the schools.

Education, which is fundamentally concerned with change, must define its constituency as the church when it is conducted in the name of and with the support of the church. Its goal cannot be merely the education of the 18-22 year old as measured by change in the life and thinking of the young of a community, but rather its goal must be the education of the entire community as measured by change in the life and thinking of that community.

The normative pattern for the change to be achieved in the community is faithfulness to the biblical-Anabaptist vision of faith and lifestyle. The success or failure of a school is thus testable by the degree to which an entire Christian community becomes more faithful to its self-affirmed source of faith and the intention of its history.

Two caveats are in order before moving toward a conclusion. First, while seminary and Bible institute people should have little difficulty in affirming the outlines of this vision, faculty committed to liberal arts education at our three colleges may object that this vision implies a rejection of the "liberating arts tradition." I respond to that concern by affirming "the liberal arts" as essential to the people of God serving in the world if the service of the Christian peoplehood is to relate wholistically, as it must, to contemporary man in his spiritual-intellectual anomie as well as complex physical needs. But having affirmed the liberal arts I hasten to qualify that affirmation. If by liberal arts we mean simply the broadening of human understanding by exploring alternative systems and world views and by introducing data which critiques the adequacy and legitimacy of the prevailing consensus, I doubt if the sectarian college is about its proper business. But if we define the function of liberal arts to include as well the focus of human understanding by ordering knowledge in terms of an identity or ideology which tells us what we ought to do in order to become what we ought to be, then the sectarian college has understood the liberal arts in a way that is both consistent with the classical intention of education as well as its own churchly mission in the world. Thus, liberal arts, yes, but liberal arts with a distinctive Christian and churchly focus.

Secondly, someone is sure to ask why the concern to be Anabaptist instead of simply Christian. The answer is very simple. History has put glasses on all of us. The word "Christian" means very little apart from qualifying terminology. It can mean Roman Catholic Christian, magisterial reformation Christian, or Anabaptist Christian to mention only three very fundamental but different understandings of the word. Spiritual-theological-intellectual honesty

necessitates that we clarify the meaning of the word "Christian." I call for a return to an Anabaptist understanding and a renewal of biblical theology and ethics on the assumption that the two are identical, that is, that to be an Anabaptist means to be committed to a radical return to the teachings and example of Jesus and the early Christian church as the normative basis for Christian faith and life in the world.

In conclusion, it is the proposal of this vision that post-secondary education in the Mennonite Brethren brotherhood become self-consciously goal oriented toward the renewed Christian peoplehood of the Mennonite Brethren Church in the world. The means for the fulfillment of that goal is the reconceptualization of Mennonite Brethren schools as "learning centers" for the ongoing renewal of churchly identity and life through a creative and vigorous church-wide teaching program in biblical and Anabaptist studies.

The purpose of a vision is to outline a proposed direction for a community of people. Its intention is not program implementation. But I feel compelled to conclude this outline of a vision by some comments about possible means of implementation. I do this in point form simply to illustrate the broad framework of a plan:

1. Because the vision is congregationally oriented, the program must seek to supplement and support the teaching ministry of these congregations. This means that it is essential that all program planning occur in closest possible consultation with the leaders of the church.

2. The focus of the program must be leadership training in the churches. The model is the biblical one of training the leaders so that they can better teach and train others.

Some ministers will feel defensive initially about such a program sponsored by the schools because they view this kind of ministry as their responsibility. This fear must be dealt with honestly on two levels. The intent of the program is not to by-pass the minister, but to supplement his ministry. But, secondly, it must be recognized that the teaching program of the church is one of its weakest links. Declining Sunday school attendance is the most superficial index. A more fundamental indicator is the growing theological pluralism in the church. I can think of no minister who is not concerned about these phenomena and who would not welcome help, even massive assistance, to revitalize the faith and faithfulness of Christian people.

3. On the structural level, there are many forms which can be used to implement the vision:

- a. Evening classes at the schools or in the churches, especially on Wednesday evenings.
- b. Saturday morning classes.
- c. All-day seminars.
- d. Weekend retreats.
- e. Bible conferences in the churches, which can take various forms, i.e. home Bible study groups with a resource person, topically oriented sessions for certain groups in the church, or more traditional forms of Bible exposition to the whole congregation.
- f. Educational outposts in more distant centers of church population to which teachers are sent on a scheduled basis.

4. The plan should begin with current programs in the church, not the introduction of new programs. Continuing education should be provided for the ministers. Sunday school teachers, a frequently frustrated group of people, should be assisted to teach more competently and with greater confidence in what they are teaching. Other leaders in the church must be strengthened by providing a more solid foundation in biblical studies and the Anabaptist heritage. New programs should emerge locally on the basis of need and vision.