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THE DEVELOPMENT OF MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA:  
SOME REFLECTIONS, INTERPRETATIONS AND VIEWPOINTS

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Who are the Mennonite Brethren? What have they become in North America through this past century? Why? The task at hand is to take aspects of John A. Toews' newly published, significant book A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church as a springboard for some evaluating.

The Interpreters of Mennonite Brethren

An incomplete catalogue of "labels" that have been used to describe Mennonite Brethren at various times and places and by various people supplies some interpretations and evaluations: pietists, immersionists, millennialists, Baptists, literalists, legalists, enthusiasts, fundamentalists, separatists, conversionists, dogmatists, dispensationalists, individualists, revivalists, naive Biblicists, experientialists, evangelists, and conservatives.

How is one to interpret Mennonite Brethren history? The author of the newly published book has written as an "insider" and, though he does not detour negative aspects, the Mennonite Brethren are generally viewed positively. There are alternate interpretations. There are some "insiders" who are much more critical. There are also "insiders" who chose to be in these ranks because of personal discovery and commitment to Mennonite Brethren emphases. Their appraisal is often highly complimentary. There are ex-Mennonite Brethren who chose to leave their ranks; they also make evaluations that are less complimentary. Members of other Mennonite groups have observed and evaluated our development from out of their similar Anabaptist past. There is considerable variation of favorable and unfavorable response. Various non-Mennonite publics have observed and assessed us and other similar religious movements as phenomena. They look at things psychologically, sociologically, theologically, historically, politically or philosophically, studying factors such as stress, milieu, era, relationships, ideas and the interplay of whatever force there may be in various given moments of history in order to determine the Sitz im Leben which gives rise to the phenomena observed.

The Mennonite Brethren Secession

Mennonite Brethren beginnings in Russia have been identified with the economic struggle of the poor, landless among the Mennonite lower strata (e.g. Robert Friedmann, et. al.). The solution to their struggle, it is contested, came in a cataclysmically experienced conversion and the establishment of a new movement stimulated by several religious influences of that environment: Moravians, Baptists, Lutheran Pietists. For the main-line Mennonites of South Russia (sometimes referred to as Kirchlich or Grosse Gemeinde) from which this

group seceded, membership had been defined as "a plain inner decision to accept Christ." Mennonite Brethren, however, saw in many of them no sincere Christ-acceptance or following. To them their past church membership seemed a nominal, socially approved, automatic, catechism-learning ritual. From out of this conflict came (1) an emotional, sometimes "self-righteous" Mennonite Brethren; (2) a defensive, sometimes anathema-hurling, traditional main-line Mennonite; and (3) some Mennonites between these two polarizations who expressed concerns about the evident decay in main-line Mennonitism, but disappointment and even disgust with some of the emerging "holier-than-thou" Mennonite Brethren.

Some of these feelings were still evident nearly two decades later when 18,000 of these Mennonites relocated to North America. The most traditional and conservative (8,000 of them) settled in Manitoba. None of these Manitobans were Mennonite Brethren. Most of the main-line Mennonites that came to the U.S.A. ultimately joined the General Conference of Mennonites (an American, Oberholtzer-initiated group, 1860 ff.). Very few immigrants joined any of the existing "American Mennonite" groups. Virtually all of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren came over together in one group and initially settled together and continued largely as they had in Russia. Mennonite Brethren, on the other hand, came in fragmented, small, leaderless groups. It was not until 1879 that they had a sense of cohesion as a group. The main-line Mennonite immigrants tended to continue to regard the conversion-emphasizing groups (M.B. and K.M.B.) as culturally inferior, economically poorer, educationally less advanced, theologically more naive, psychologically more emotional, sociologically less adjusted, and situationally more gullible to the prevalent pietistic and revivalist moods sweeping the western world. These kinds of feelings ran so strong at some places, that some of the main-line fellow immigrants regarded Mennonite Brethren as defectors from their Mennonite heritage. The Mennonite Brethren themselves, however, viewed their 1860 experience as a major spiritual break-through and a return to the true emphases of Menno--emphases such as a necessity for a new birth, followed by a life of fruitfulness which attested to the reality of their Christ-experience.

It is true that there was some "wild" fanaticism among Mennonite Brethren in Russia in the early years. Unfortunately, some of the accusers chose to highlight these fanatic elements and pictured them as somewhat typical of most Mennonite Brethren. In this respect, parallels can be drawn between fanatic elements of sixteenth-century Anabaptism, in its many diverse expressions, with the exaggeration which characterized a few of the Mennonite Brethren converts in the early years of their existence.

By the "insiders," for whom this much-needed spiritual experience came in their moment of crisis, only subjective analyses were made. For them this important, holy moment elicited descriptions such as: miraculous, heavenly, indescribable, wonderful, marvelous, fantastic! But the assessments of those from whom they had defected were: ridiculous, silly, gullible, naive, radical, foolish! "Hallelujahs" and curses were cross-fired, bringing frustration and confusion to others who were sorting out the pros and cons more objectively. Some realized the need for dialogue, reforms, repentance and reconciliation--but the air was too charged with disagreement for some of this to happen.

### The Complexity of Analyzing

There is a complexity of variables at any given moment in history. An attempt to understand and to decide whether to reject or to participate in the newly offered option gives rise to a dilemma. The choice must make sense in each person's Sitz im Leben. To rejecters no rational explanation seems to make sense. To the participants it all seems to make sense. It is becoming increasingly evident that even stated reasons for either participation or rejection are not sufficient clarification for objective analysts who probe for the actual reasons. Probing into that 1860 "moment" in Russia has other possible causes than the usually stated "official reasons." It would be interesting and worthwhile to know how much of the dynamic came from less easily identified pushes such as economics, prestige, kinship attachments, political forces, etc. How much was "holy" or "unholy?" Or, more problematic still, how much was an alloy of holy and unholy and then defended or explained in cause-justifying "spiritual terms?" Rationalization, if needed, can be formulated conveniently for both participants and rejecters of newly discovered options. Systems, institutions, programs, organizations, and power hierarchies have been rationalized into or out of existence with emotionally-loaded stance-justifying "spiritual" language.

That some course correction was needed by Russia's Mennonites cannot be doubted. The meaning of that course correction at that given time and for subsequent generations raises another important inquiry. A statement of Christ-faithfulness and restoration in one era can become so overwhelmingly central in the continuation of a movement that it comes to mean "course perversion" as time goes by. A correct emphasis of one era and situation can be advocated so insistently that new course corrections to even more basic and fundamental Kingdom of God matters are neglected. Can this case be made of Mennonite Brethren in their 115-year history? Important creedal, practical, experiential, methodological correctness, carefully spelled out in the language and situation of a given time, does not assure subsequent generations of meaningful answers or directives. "Brittleness" of this kind is dangerous since it usually stifles Biblio-centric aliveness. Doctrine, polity, tradition, organization--rather than the Word of God--become the final course of appeal where "holy matters" have been announced as "settled forever." It is evident that God has met and touched people in significant and specific ways in many situations. It is also evident that He wishes to do so for all men, everywhere, in significant and specific ways in each given situation. Historians can report such happenings, but neither historians nor theologians must prescribe the specifics of the when, why, how of such "holy moments." Each has its own uniqueness.

### From the Russian to the American Setting

The Russian Sitz im Leben which gave rise to the Mennonite Brethren Church was a complex thing with its many cross currents. In less than two decades, Mennonite Brethren were transplanted to the North American frontier in a new setting with even more complex cross currents. The announced Russification had threatened all Mennonites--the main-line group as well as the renewalists. It meant de-Germanizing and de-traditionalizing Russia's foreign, ethnic-tenacious citizenry. North America, however, promised these threatened ones a frontier on which life could go on as it had before with seemingly unlimited rights to live in the desired isolation in order to maintain their distance from "the world" in their Stillen im Lande stance. Relocation was explained in

religious terms--"for conscience sake." Specifically, it was the compulsory military service threat that became the most plausible explanation. Poverty was another reason--given particularly by those who were landless and for whom the pinch of poverty was intensifying among the rapidly expanding, land-hoarding, wealthier Mennonites.

With the intention of re-establishing isolationistic Strassendörfer in North America, a religiously conservative, socially ghettoized, poorly educated, and poverty-stricken segment of Russia's Mennonite populace set out with rather utopian expectations of what the new frontier held in store. Others came too--for the excitement of a new frontier, for even greater wealth-gathering opportunities and, for some, as an acceptable way to exit from tense community and family situations in Russia.

That things did not turn out as utopian and favorable as some had fantasied is evident from reports of the earliest settlers. Many discouraging circumstances played a significant part in those first years--the barrenness of the countryside, the difficulty of securing housing for harsh winters, the destruction of vegetation in the grasshopper invasions, and the desperate loneliness of being separated from families, friends, and former church leaders. In the midst of these disheartening experiences, a number of them responded to the kind of emphasis which Mennonite Brethren had found meaningful in times of crisis. Perhaps this, in part, explains why there was such a large number of conversions and joining of Mennonite Brethren ranks during the first two decades after arrival in America. It wasn't long before virtually every immigrant Mennonite community had conversion-emphasizing members other than Mennonite Brethren.

#### Americanization--New Insights

Russia's Mennonite Strassendörfer arrangement was soon abandoned in the U.S.A. as undesirable. With this move, the Americanization of the immigrant Mennonites began. Stresses and strains accompanied the process, with the luxes of "worldliness" threatening to undermine precisely that for which they had emigrated from Russia. As long as they were relatively isolated, the socialization of subsequent generations could be continued in a controlled environment. In the midst of the world-stream, however, option after option was introduced to the young and curious pioneering Mennonite. In the process he made some new discoveries: (1) German people and their culture were not necessarily superior to others as they had been taught to believe in Europe. (2) Mennonites did not have the most advanced farming techniques and equipment. Some Americans did better. (3) Many other Christian denominations, movements and leaders weren't as heretical as they had been described by their trusted forebears and leaders. (4) Mennonites did not have to apologize for their existence in America. They were accepted and loved. They had a right to their own views and their commitments. (5) All of the traditional emphases of Mennonites were not necessarily religious. Some were "cultural baggage" and not central to Christ-commitment. (6) The evangelistic/revivalist phenomenon didn't always lead to fanaticism, abuses or Pharaism. In America it was viewed more favorably.

#### Adjusting to Americanization

All of this, and more, challenged the authority of both the teachings and the methods of the heretofore trusted leaders (usually ministers) of the

community. New ways had to be found and were found--particularly in the establishment of schools. Some of the needed control was provided and served in significant ways in transition: attempts to retain German, to discourage living away from Mennonite concentrations, to provide acceptable German, Mennonite-authored or scrutinized literature, to retain contact with the trusted Russian Mennonite leadership.

In another way the relocation process was an unsettling experience for the immigrant Mennonites. The "American Mennonites," very much like themselves, they had thought, proved to be quite different--so different, in fact, that they seldom worshipped together. In the Russian setting, most Mennonites had lived among "their own kind" in villages. In the closely settled, new Mennonite communities like Kansas and Manitoba, there was more diversity, and differences loomed very large--large enough so that they established entirely separate places of worship and education and insisted on marriage only with "their own kind." Dialect, dress, life-style, educational interests/dis-interests, etc., brought a whole set of identifying labels to the fore distinguishing "my kind" from "your kind." They referred to these different kinds: Molotschna, Karolswalde, Prussian, Michaliner, Volhynia Swiss, Krimmer, Volga, Chortitza, Bergthaler, Kleine Gemeinde, Old Colony, etc. Furthermore, many of the groups were identified ethnically or religiously with a prominent leader, usually a minister. They said they "belonged to" a group led by Schrag, Buller, Schellenberg, Peters, Wall, Unruh, Wiebe, Tschetter, Friesen, Toews, or Eckert, etc. Though they all called themselves Mennonites, they tended to keep each other at arm's length.

Mennonite Brethren also had these indications of strata in their ranks. The Marion County, Kansas, group was made up of a mixture of Molotschna, Krimmer and Volga people. Some of the Volga immigrants had joined the Mennonite Brethren in Russia from out of a lethargic, nominally Lutheran or Reformed tradition. They did not speak Molotschna low-German, were described as "excitable" in nature, and were often literalists in their response to Scriptural injunctions. The most tense public issue of the Molotschna-Volga interaction was the insistence of the Volga segment that Christians, men and women alike, greet each other with a "holy kiss," in accordance with New Testament teachings. The Molotschna people objected. Similar tensions were evident between the Molotschna and the Volga people in Nebraska. It was discussed at the early conference sessions and the Volga people lost out. One sensed that the issue was larger than the "holy kiss" exchange. A complex maze of other under-currents seem evident. One can almost hear the Molotschna folks saying things like: "Are these Volga people really Mennonites at all? Will we get into another 'fröhliche Richtung' if we let this go on? Are their assertions really scriptural--can they be trusted to understand God's Word correctly? If we give in on this, will they usurp leadership and bring about other teachings and practices of 'their own kind' alien to our tradition?" In one sense it was a testing point of how brotherly the new Mennonite Brethren group really could be across heretofore resisted "our kind" "your Kind" barriers in this new movement.

The founding of the Hillsboro Mennonite Brethren Church includes some of this element as well. There was no original Mennonite Brethren nucleus here. Among the Kirchliche immigrant Polish French Creek congregation, known as the Johannestal congregation, a number of people were converted. Within ten miles of this Hillsboro group, in 1881, there were two other conversion-emphasizing groups: the Gnadenu Krimmer Mennonite Brethren with their vigorous, much loved

leader, Jacob A. Wiebe, and Eckert's Mennonite Brethren Church at Ebenfeld. Within 20 miles of Hillsboro there was a very lively conversionist-group (Lone Tree) being formed in McPherson County, under revivalist John Holdeman's leadership. Yet the French Creek newly converted group chose to by-pass Gnadenu, Ebenfeld and Lone Tree to ask for leadership in both baptizing and church organization from Elder Abraham Schellenberg some 60 miles away at the Ebenezer Mennonite Brethren Church in Reno County. Why did they do so? Was it the identification with this ethnic group that they found more compatible or was it the authority which Schellenberg had as an ordained elder from Russia?

The assimilation of the Volga converts in both Kansas and Nebraska fared rather poorly by and large. Some contended that they were mostly unstable people. Verification for this was the fact that in the course of one life-time some of them had shifted denominational allegiances four times: Lutheran, Mennonite Brethren, Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist.

### Religious Permissiveness on the Frontier

The recently founded Mennonite Brethren Church and the Americanization process combined forces to give a new kind of permissiveness to a group that had heretofore been bound by predominantly traditional ways. They firmly believed that they had discovered something new and significant. In the American setting they soon learned that there were other American Christian movements that could attract adherents with the same kind of impulse, though with other variations of emphasis. This included, especially the denominations that were particularly powerful on the frontier, such as Baptists and Seventh Day Adventists. Some other Mennonites were attracted to Swedenborgianism.

This permissive era, with its revivalist methodology and the re-thinking of tradition, provided the traditionalist-bent leaders with fuel for warnings about heresy and danger on the horizon. The many varieties of enthusiastic religious outbursts in America with their "come-outerism" ("Come ye out from among them and be ye separate saith the Lord") resulted in rampant sectarianism. Appraisals of the movements of this era vasillate between praise and blame, shame and glory, dishonor and fame. On the one hand, course corrections were needed as many asserted, even among most main-line traditional churches, but the abuses and rationalizations that transpired in the name of renewal efforts, along with the ill-will generated represent the other side of the appraisal. Defectors from most main-line traditionalist groups felt disinheritance and alienation--often from their closest associates. Many "come-outers" suffered deeply in making such radical commitments. Their suffering, however, furnished them with further dynamic and substantiation of the rightness of their move. Had not Jesus said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake?"

This attitude of deeply felt "rightness" constituted part of the problem that developed among the "come-outers." If what they had experienced, thought, and become was God-given, then many of them felt they were beyond criticism from anybody. The Holy Spirit was leading them, they asserted. God was on their side. Both sensitivity and insensitivity could be seen. Some observers, though attracted by aspects of the renewal they witnessed, were also often repulsed by the Pharisaism which typified some within the ranks of the "revived." This made the sorting out process for the would-be joiners all the more difficult. Was the new movement all good or all bad? Was it all that the joiners said it was? What about the elements of "wildness" that erupted--

was that Holy Spirit inspired and? What about that which had always been within their traditions, had they been totally wrong? Was the alienation of relationships that resulted God-willed as well?

In America's sectarian heyday, the mood of permissiveness offered options that attracted some: perfectionism and sanctification, millennialist announcements about approaching end-times, newly received "God-revelations," and the espousal of universalism--God would ultimately save all people. These, and other ideas, also influenced Mennonites in America and resulted in a sizable number of spin-off groups. There is evidence that the "American Mennonites" tended to be more schism-roneed than the immigrant Mennonites from Russia in the nineteenth century. John F. Funk's The Mennonite Church and Her Accusers (1878) bears evidence of this, as do the articles and pamphlets printed by the Mennonites in this era. The Mennonite Brethren were also affected by these movements--particularly millennialist teachings as propounded by the Seventh Day Adventists. There was a sizable number of defections. Perhaps the tensions of the crude pioneer setting and the alienation felt from fellow Mennonites, along with other factors, provided some push for them in this direction as they looked for God's promised end to the time of suffering and a new beginning for the children of God.

#### Mennonite Brethren and Baptists

Since Baptists had associated helpfully with the emerging Mennonite Brethren in Russia, it should not surprise us to note that these relationships continued to be nurtured in America. This association seems to have been particularly distasteful to the main-line Mennonites. When Mennonite Brethren were dubbed "Baptists" by other Mennonites, it was far from a compliment--it represented a forsaking of the true Mennonite traditional faith.

Eight months after their secession in Russia, the newly-formed Mennonite Brethren group declared that they would now be baptized as believers since their previous, so-called baptism had only been a meaningless ritual performed in their former church association. It had not represented an actual, personal and living faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Not only was this "re-baptism" regarded by the Kirchliche as a detestable, tradition-denying experience, but the newly chosen mode was equally unsavory--immersion!

In the years that followed Mennonite Brethren in Russia gained additional assistance from Baptists in their re-study of the faith by carefully reviewing both Baptist and Mennonite confessions of faith. They also enjoyed significant and influential relationships with some Baptist leaders. Ultimately the Mennonite Brethren statement of faith came out more "Mennonite" than it did Baptist," though there was a period of time, in some locales, where it seemed the Baptist influence might swallow Mennonite distinctives. Also, for Mennonite Brethren, the newly felt push to be aggressive in evangelizing and missionary endeavors was made possible initially through Baptist mission organizations.

In North America contacts with Baptists continued. Some Mennonite Brethren leaders were educated at the Colgate-Rochester Baptist Seminary in New York in preparation for educational and missionary ministries. Some of the first North American Mennonite Brethren missionaries in both Africa and India served under Baptists. German-speaking Baptist Walter Rauschenbusch was an appreciated, occasional speaker at Mennonite Brethren gatherings in Kansas as well as being influential as a teacher at the Seminary and through his writings.

It is interesting to notice that the York County, Nebraska, Mennonite Brethren church school is listed as "Menonite [sic] Baptist German School" in the 1888 atlas.

There were other influences besides those of Baptists. The York/Hamilton County Mennonite Brethren Church in Nebraska repeatedly invited some holiness preachers from Fort Wayne, Indiana, to preach there in the early decades of the 20th century. It was not long before Mennonite Brethren students attended Chicago's Moody Bible Institute and the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. Gradually a large number of main-line American evangelical movements, denominations and personalities played influential roles in shaping some theological emphases and in providing some models for the life and expression of the church in America. As this is seen in retrospect, some represented important influences, others were short-lived. How beneficial and significant some of their influences were for Mennonite Brethren beliefs, practices, and emphases is still in question. Some of them were certainly incompatible with Anabaptism.

#### The Tension of Being Both Mennonite and Missionary

Each new generation of Mennonite Brethren inherited the Stillen im Lande ideal as well as a theoretically espoused insistence upon being "missionary." God's call was to be "in the world but not of the world," a directive that had long been emphasized. On the American frontier this tension was the cause of considerable frustration for Mennonite Brethren who were confronted with the desirability of being both isolationistic and evangelistic. Americanization was viewed with considerable fear--fear of adjustment, accommodation, assimilation and a loss of the "faith of the fathers." On the other hand, the newly felt need to be missionary demanded a degree of adjustment, accommodation and assimilation in order to make a sharing of the Gospel in one's environment a possibility. The "in the world but not of the world" God-call seemed to be a kind of tight-rope walking.

#### Conflicting Educational Goals and Methods

The necessity to educate their youth was soon evident and became a major undertaking for Mennonite immigrants after settling down. Education in this new setting had to deal with the transition from European-type authoritarianism to America's emphasis on individualism and democracy. At first there was insistence that the teaching be predominantly in German and that the subject matter be religious studies. The German language, religious studies and church gatherings were almost inseparably linked for some time, while other pursuits and studies shifted over to English. This separation in the concept of education led to a conflict about educational goals and priorities. It came to be German and Bible school education versus English and liberal arts content--a conflict which Tabor, Pacific and the Mennonite Brethren Bible Colleges have felt with some intensity at different stages. Some other issues that schooling brought to the fore were such things as parties, public boy-girl friendships, competing in sports events, staging plays, and debating. Was it really necessary for Mennonite Brethren schools to emulate other American schools? The more conservative older leaders and parents saw their youth slipping away from them. The tensions were critical and real for them and were frequently aired in conversations, prayer, congregational and conference gatherings, and community meetings. Would the second generation lose all that the immigrant generation had come to America to safeguard? Could the age-old

pattern of "holding" the next generation really not work in America? The rapidity of change from many generations of being the Stillen im Lande to Americanization in a short time was difficult to accommodate. It was as though they needed to make up for lost time through years of ghettoization and isolation--a phenomenon similar to the emancipation of Jews from out of years of ghettoization.

Those who stayed in Russia were generally more progressive and not nearly as hesitant as the emigrants to America to make forward strides educationally and culturally. When the Russländer immigrants came to Canada a half century later and settled alongside of the Kanadier (19th century immigrants), the Russländer seemed to have been considerably more progressive than the Kanadier had been. The adjustment of these two segments to each other was not easy, precisely on issues such as education, cultural interests, wealth/poverty, relationship to government, etc.--a whole barrage of conflicts embodied in being "in the world but not of the world."

#### A New Agenda of Issues

The American situation introduced a new agenda for Mennonite Brethren which, in many respects, was considerably different from the one facing them in the Russian setting. How should one relate to the native American Indians? to slavery? tobacco? alcoholic beverages in a prohibitionist milieu? to the use of guns for hunting? to land speculation? to friendly American neighbors? to other denominations? to itinerant revivalists? to the presence and honor given to the flag in public schools? to the availability of education in good, government-sponsored schools? What about voting? They soon learned that all citizens were, in fact, a part of the decision-making process--either by voicing their opinions or by refusing to do so. Democracy, they learned, was government determined by the majority of the people themselves, not super-imposed dictatorial, authoritarian leadership as they had seen it heretofore. Voting also included dimensions such as the free press, the rights of women and negroes, freedom to campaign--all of which was a kind of permissiveness not known to them and their forebears. Indeed, the segregated, ghettoized Mennonite village or colony was a thing of the past. America was a democracy and Mennonites, though frustrated by all that this means, were captivated by it. The most frustrated, however, were the leaders who saw how quickly their direction-giving in all matters, as they had traditionally given it, was no longer as highly respected, nor, frankly, as meaningful and insightful on these new levels.

The acceptance and friendliness that fellow Americans had for these German-speaking immigrants from Russia ran hot and cold. The de-Germanization process in both language use and cultural styles was a relatively slow one. German and "peculiar Mennonite culture patterns" were an integral part of their church and community life. It was a kind of cliquishness, similar to many other ethnic groups, that gave whole-hearted acceptance only to "their own kind." During both World Wars the Mennonites were regarded with some suspicion as to their political loyalties because of this. This was not without just cause in some localities.

#### Leadership and Growth

The small, scattered, leaderless Mennonite Brethren nucleus that came to the U.S.A. beginning in 1875 appears not to have had a cohesiveness of

identification until "official ordained Mennonite Brethren ministers" arrived after 1879--specifically Elders Abraham Schellenberg and Johann J. Regier. For the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren this was not so. They had arrived in the summer of 1874 with their trusted leader, Elder Jacob A. Wiebe. The Mennonite Brethren groups received some leadership from lay people, but this was not generally regarded as authentic since these had not been officially ordained in Russia. An illustration of this is Peter Regier's role in the Hamilton/York County, Nebraska, congregation where his qualifications to lead were questioned. In 1878, when he called for and convened the "first Mennonite Brethren Conference," the conference was declared invalid because (1) recognized, authoritative leadership was not present and (2) the representation of Mennonite Brethren members was not adequate from several geographical areas. With the 1879 arrival of Elders Schellenberg and Regier, one notes an "official, recognized" beginning of the Mennonite Brethren in North America.

There was phenomenal growth in membership in the first decade after their arrival, not only because of immigrating Russian Mennonite Brethren, but more particularly through conversions and a joining of their ranks from out of the main-line Mennonite immigrant group. At the Hamilton/York County congregation, for example, more than 150 were baptized within ten years. Obviously this was interpreted as "sheep stealing" and contributed to inter-Mennonite tensions in small, closely knit communities where families and close friends were broken by such choices. The 34 members that constituted the 1882 charter membership of the Hillsboro Mennonite Brethren Church were all from the French Creek Johannestal, main-line Mennonite group.

In the early conference records one senses that reference to "mission work" in which Mennonite Brethren were active refers primarily to the "ripe fields" among the main-line Mennonite immigrants and the nominally Lutheran and Reformed German-speaking Volga immigrants from Russia. Any sizable number of converts was always from these two categories in those early years. When the population had stabilized somewhat, the number of converts joining the Mennonite Brethren Church also diminished considerably. Perhaps among the natural reasons for this phenomenon of many conversions were tension-filled aspects of their relocation such as epidemics, the grasshopper plague, severe weather conditions and family separations, which generally amplified the life and death sensitivities of these people. One notes a sense of disappointment several decades later when reports at conferences indicate fewer conversions in their home mission endeavors. It was not until many decades later that Mennonite Brethren were able to make inroads in witnessing to people of non-Mennonite background, though they preached and felt the necessity of being missionary and evangelistic. They seemed to be able to do this more comfortably with people at a radical geographical or racial distance from them--in Africa, India, or among the Comanche Indians in the Oklahoma Territory. The difficulty of being missionary and evangelizing was the source of considerable frustration for many. In their frustration a number left the ranks of Mennonite Brethren to become Baptists, to affiliate with the more sect-like community Bible churches, or to become involved in the faith-mission type of outreach that did not battle with the cultural baggage of the German-speaking and isolated Mennonite Brethren.

#### Are Mennonite Brethren "Church"?

One of the most important concepts theoretically emphasized by Mennonites since their Anabaptist beginnings was "church." The 1860 event in

Russia was largely an attempt at the restoration of that reality. What have Mennonite Brethren become after a century in North America--115 years after their attempted restoration in Russia? Some descriptive though obviously partial and inadequate expressions give evidence of transformations: Americanized, organized, publicized, compromised, theologized, de-Germanized, liberalized, individualized, democratized, evangelicalized, de-centralized, ecumenized, socialized and urbanized.

Most of us admit that, though there are some very fine aspirations in our emphases, we are not what we say we are. We are often still very much enamored by the Stillen im Lande ideal. Is that stance a God-call or, as Leland Harder has described it, an "accident of history?" Where our much spoken of Anabaptist forebears not driven into isolation because they were anything but quiet about their commitment, their life-style, and their "in the world but not of the world? stance? Is it not important for us to see our God-call as being where people are and where the Gospel is needed? Are not Jesus, Paul, the disciples and the early church our best models in this as well? Die Stillen im Lande hardly describes them. Even our attempts at urbanizing are often only huddles of "Tabor alumni," "folks from my own home town," or "our kind of people," instead of being the "family of God," eager to witness to, love, invite and embrace the world's homeless into that Family.

Instead of giving priority to being "church," it appears that we have been overly eager to be accepted, appreciated and wanted in America's mainstream citizenry and Christendom. Psychologically that desire can easily be understood from out of a history of rejection as the progeny of the "hated Anabaptist heresy" for four centuries. We appear to have become enamored by bigness, success, affluence. The attainment of these goals brought with it some serious consequences in terms of being faithful to Christ. There is much anonymity among us. We do not care and love one another honestly, deeply, responsibly.

We sit in polished pews, have professional leaders, carefully defined constitutions, well-practiced music-making, literature galore, large offerings, many conference mission and service programs, and the committee involvement of many from among us. Is that necessarily Church? Do we really have a priesthood of all believers? Good News (Gospel) for the despairing and enslaved? Jesus-like compassion for the hurting in today's world?

A high priority "call" for Mennonite Brethren was to be the people of God--and that meant being the Church--Christ's Body still at work. He came to seek and to save that which was lost. We have been on the move a great deal, geographically. Has our moving been motivated by personal pushes for further wealth-gathering, for prestige, for enjoying easier situations? Or has it been motivated by our deep drive to be Christ's Body, being at places where He is needed.

#### Clarifying Issues

The pressures to clarify issues have increased primarily for two reasons. We have moved much more boldly into "the world" from out of our history of isolation, and the volume of issues to be confronted has increased in the more complex society of 20th century America. For the first half of this century the resolutions and directives of conferences, local congregations and leaders were relevant for a provincial Mennonite Brethren, still largely with

isolationistic mind-set. The answers to issues raised in the first half of this century were generally crisp, concise, and simple. They appear to have been settled by trusted leaders whose proposals were fairly quickly agreed upon by the predominantly male, older decision-making bodies gathered for such decisions. These directives tended to be confirmations of concepts already espoused in Russia. Gradually, however, the situations became increasingly complex and the issues demanding answers more urgent. Old, previously raised issues were often re-opened for further or better clarification than the previous answers had supplied. The newer issues have usually been of a more universal nature than previously. Furthermore, the process of question-answering has no longer been satisfied with an authoritarian proposal made by one of the trusted leaders. There has been a tendency to handle matters more democratically, more thoroughly, and, fortunately, more Biblically in many instances rather than traditionally. Usually the end-result has been an answer less crisp, concise or simple than formerly. With the consideration of more variables in both the issue itself and in ways of interpreting the Bible, there has been a wider diversity of opinion and therefore a less clear directive.

Often we have been forced into formulating directives by situations such as war, depression, affluence, frontier life, business associations, labor unions, marriage, divorce, etc. The new American setting and the developing world-awareness has fortunately forced us to study the Bible, Jesus, and the concept of the Church, and to clarify many priorities which have heretofore been overlooked in favor of tradition or common usage. This has not usually been a comfortable process, but it has been enlightening and rewarding, bringing with it some renewal and much needed re-thinking about being the people of God in our world.

#### Many Inter-Relationships

Mennonite Brethren, through the years, found themselves in an increasing number of relationships with other Christians. Early relationships were largely only with fellow immigrant Mennonites and some Baptists. Slowly associations with other evangelicals, pietists, and the "American Mennonites" developed. With the introduction of religious movements already alluded to, there were contacts with individuals from among them--millennialists, universalists, revivalists, prohibitionists, etc. Some of these movements resulted in camps, and finally in agencies that represented these views: The National Council of Churches, the National Association of Evangelicals, the International Council of Christian Churches, etc. In addition to such agencies there were fellowship, evangelizing, and service agencies--Christian Business Men's Committee, Youth for Christ, Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ, Billy Graham Association, Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service, etc.--each of these with programs designed for participation by believers of other faiths. Beyond this there were community groups brought into existence to nurture individuals in prayer, Bible study, service functions, evangelizing, or discipling. At times, their extra-church activities tended to become the most vital and exciting arenas of personal participation. This would leave the local churches with the more traditional routines and rituals of providing the regular worship services, Sunday school, choirs, youth programs, baptisms, marriages, and burials. Because the greater vitality was often felt on the non-congregational levels, the local churches' routine programs tended to be regarded of least significance.

Furthermore, the availability of insurance, medical help, police force, etc. has also tended to make us feel less dependent on God or one another. The prayers of Mennonite Brethren today do not have the "life and death" urgency which the Stiz im Leben a century ago forced upon them. Perhaps we haven't yet felt the urgency of being rescued from even deeper and more devastating demonic forces in our Sitz im Leben today.

#### Mennonite Brethren--from Sect to Denomination

H. Richard Niebuhr's Social Sources of Denominationalism carefully distinguishes between sect and church and points up the tendency of sect to become church after the initial flashpoint passes. The socialization of the next generation then gets under way. Mennonite Brethren development fits Niebuhr's description well. We have socialized our youth so well that the choice of membership other than Mennonite Brethren is looked upon with askance. In this century, we have also adjusted so well to the American way of life and to mainstream evangelical Christianity that it has become increasingly difficult to explain uniqueness of Mennonite Brethren when questioned. Radicalism in commitment and ethical responses to world and church wrongs tend to be lacking. Often the "cause of America" is seen as synonymous with our own life goals. Fear of being odd is more threatening than fear of not being Christ-like. It may well be that course correction for the Body of Christ will erupt again among us, bringing a sect into existence that traditionalists will combat as heresy. What is lacking in Mennonite Brethren uniqueness is not a theoretical stance, but faithfulness to our orientation.

#### Where Are We? Where Should We Be?

In 1960 we declared that the Mennonite Brethren had experienced a century of grace and witness. God had indeed led us. But is that all that is to be said? As we raise our "hallelujahs" for the many good things that have happened, we also see warning signs on the horizon that other priorities than being the people of God are bringing about serious discrepancies between what we say we want to be and what we are.

Where are we in this pilgrimage? Some see us as having arrived at a level of stabilization. These assert that we are now at the best stage of our history. Some contend that the Golden Years of our existence were in the era when authorities spoke, were heard and followed. There was clarity then; resolutions and directives were unquestioningly accepted. Some would announce that the Mennonite Brethren Church is, in fact, finished. There are new, more vital streams of God-at-work where we can and should go. Others declare that we have, indeed, accommodated too much to the world-order, but we are not beyond the possibility of change by repentance. Voices around us are also saying that the evangelical kind of Anabaptism advocated by Mennonite Brethren has come of age precisely in these times. What we have theoretically espoused is ripe for precisely this moment. It seems that while some Mennonite Brethren have given up feeling a rightness about our aspirations, others are becoming very much what we have wanted to be. We have come to a challenging and interesting time in history. Perhaps others will "out-Mennonite Brethren" us in their goals and aspirations. It is Christ-faithfulness that is important, not Mennonite Brethren theory or tradition. "Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 3:11).