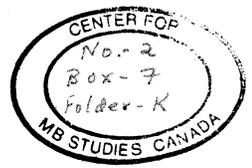


CONGREGATIONAL RELATIONSHIP OF MB'S AND GC'S IN CANADA



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In the twenties of this century thousands of Mennonites from Russia came to this country. So far as their religious affiliation was concerned likely all adults belonged to one of the following groups: 1) Kirchliche, here in Canada called GC's (the largest group); 2) Mennonite Brethren; 3) Alliance (a comparatively small group).

They all brought certain attitudes and prejudices regarding the other two groups with them and these in turn greatly influenced the first few decades here in Canada, so far as church affiliation and cooperation between the groups is concerned.

The Kirchliche in Russia had always operated under a certain conflict and contradiction. Their catechism, which was the obligatory textbook for those applying for membership, stated clearly that only individuals who had been born again and who led a life of sanctification could be baptized and become members of a Mennonite congregation. The practice though was quite different. All children born of Mennonite parents had to submit to baptism and then join the church. They were compelled to do so. Only church members in good standing were married and non-members were even restricted in some of their social contacts. Then there was the persuasive public opinion which insisted that every grown-up person be baptized and become a member of the church. In a closed community, such as we had in Russia, public opinion is a very strong force. Thus it was only a question of time before all children of Mennonite parents became members of one or the other church.

A young Mennonite had to submit to baptism and join the church. This was not altogether bad. In fact, in many ways it was beneficial. As a member of a congregation a person would have to follow a life style not too objectionable to the rest of the community. The church could and did discipline him if he trespassed in a crude way. He would come to church with his children and observe basic moral restrictions.

But a goodly number of those joining the GC church, did so because that was the traditional and pragmatic way. To rebel against this was practically unthinkable. But they were unspiritual and often antagonistic to Christian principles. Least of all they favoured a warmer Christian atmosphere such

as existed in the MB congregations. Indifferent to church life as such they nevertheless would turn out in numbers when essential congregational questions were to be decided in a brotherhood meeting. They invariably would vote against stricter congregational discipline and a warmer type of congregational life. The presence of these members in the congregation naturally lowered the spiritual atmosphere and often prevented reforms. In frustration quite a few GC ministers and a few elders, because of this factor, left their church and joined one of the other two. For many years the churches of the MB's in Russia have greatly benefited by this.

The great majority of the Kirchliche were sincere God-fearing, Bible respecting, individuals who tried to lead a God-pleasing life. Many of them, due to lack of training or due to an innate shyness were unable to vocalize their faith the way the average MB did. Some did not wish to do so, because observing some of their MB acquaintances they at times found that their testimony about their faith did not fully agree with their practise. There is an interesting illustration of this reported in P.M. Friesen's history on page 619 (German Edition).

A.A. Neufeld, the famous and highly respected educator took objection to the much talk but rather meager performance of some of the "Believers"... To a friend who testified to his faith gladly "in season and out of season" he said on one occasion: "If I had, what you claim to have, then I would be different from what you and I are today."...Many individuals felt just like Neufeld did.

Then in most, likely not all, GC churches there were members who vocalized their faith, regularly assembled with like-minded individuals for Bible study and common prayers.

The MB's traditionally have always emphasized the exact time of their conversion and they have found it difficult to recognize any one as a full fledged brother or sister in Christ that could not do so. The MB usually looked at the unspiritual layer of membership in the GC church and judged the whole church on this basis. They were inclined to overlook the positive factors that could be found in that church. In a subtle way many of the MB's let the GC's feel that they considered them spiritually inferior. The MB's in their majority laid great weight on the form of baptism and often made it known that the baptism by sprinkling, as practiced in the GC church, lacked

all biblical basis, and was therefore no baptism. This offended many since many of the GC people held their traditional way of baptism in high esteem and especially since the form of baptism is one of those things the Bible does not clearly specify. The MB would not dream of admitting anyone not baptized by immersion to their communion table and only an exceptional member of the church, such as P.M. Friesen, would take communion with GC people.

These were underlying factors which coloured directly or indirectly the relation between the two brother conferences, who in their basic teaching, salvation through Christ Jesus, did fully agree. Possibly another underlying factor could be mentioned here. The MB's have always looked upon the GC's as upon their most profitable field to gain members for their own church. Whenever they felt that a certain GC family or individual was sympathetic to them, they would try hard to bring them over into their church. This really was done with the best intentions. The MB were convinced that such a step would be helpful to the person or persons in question. And to admit the truth, it often was. But this often caused hurt in GC circles and helped to strain the relations between the two groups.

Here in Canada our people were scattered. In seeking a place for farming or working they often had no choice but had to accept what was available. Thus we find during the years 1923 to 1940 there were many new settlements where GC's and MB's lived side by side. They were often poor and there were too few of them and things were too uncertain in general for them to organize as congregations and even build a church building. They all had to make compromises and so we find at that time many places where both groups together conducted worship, Sunday school and choir work. They were not organized as a congregation but as a group. Sometimes there were ministers among them but often they invited preachers from the outside, especially for such occasions as Thanksgiving Day and for Bible Studies—a beloved practice at that time. A minister, or more often two, would be invited for say, two or three days, to expound a certain book of the Bible. Sometimes the two ministers represented the two conferences but more likely they both were MB preachers. This was because the MB's at that time were considerably better supplied with good servants of the word.

These joint meetings have been a blessing and many a sinner has found here his Lord and others grew in insight and understanding of the Word of God.

Even today one can meet former participants who remember those years as helpful to them.

I think that the MB's did well in stressing the need to have a conscious experience of reconciliation with God. This clear preaching has helped many a one to have such experience himself or herself. Regretably human frailties prevented the groups of various church backgrounds to benefit fully from the opportunities presenting themselves to them. Let me relate several situations that I personally either have participated in or that are very well known to me.

A group of families, of GC and MB affiliation, we among them, in 1926 settled around Gilroy and Lawson in Saskatchewan. I knew that an MB minister, Peter Braun, was to come to live there too. I approached the local United Church and inquired if they would be willing to rent to us their house of worship since they were using it only once a month on Sunday afternoons. They were glad to do so and requested only a modest rent. When the minister Braun had arrived I went to see him. I told him that we were about a dozen and a half families and that it would be advisable for us to have regular services on Sunday. We had the place for it too. Would he be willing to serve us as our minister? Braun was puzzled. We could not form a congregation, he said, being of such varied background. No, I said, no congregation would be organized. We simply would gather for worship and Sunday school and he would preach to us as he was led. To this Braun agreed and we immediately began our services.

In the course of time more families settled in the vicinity most of them being MB's. Two more MB ministers were among these new settlers. The MB's then organized themselves as a congregation, as a branch of the Herbert MB Church, and began to meet separately, not in the church and not on Sunday forenoons, but in private homes and in the afternoons. An unseen line was drawn between members of the MB church and the rest of us. In their separate meetings they began to serve communion, never inviting any of us to participate. On the contrary hurtful statements were made in the building which we all had an equal right to, since we all had paid equally for it. Braun said from the pulpit that all those who had received the "biblical baptism" were to meet that afternoon at a certain place. Since the Bible is to be the basis for any form of baptism we indirectly, but plainly, were told that our form of baptism was

unbiblical and hence invalid. The Rev. Jakob Bargaen, otherwise a fine brother, let himself say from the pulpit: "It was the devil's greatest triumph when he invented the various forms of baptism." Since Braun already had made it clear to us that their form was "the biblical" one, it was easy for us to conclude who in Rev. J. Bargaen's opinion had invented our form. Such statements, totally unnecessary by the way, did not bring the group closer together. I was approached to organize a GC group but refused to do so. Although I resented the unwise statements by those brethren I still believed that on the whole their preaching was good and a separation into two, possibly even unfriendly groups, would not build the Kingdom of God. On the contrary, two of the GC members came to see me and I helped them to come to peace with God. I advised them to be baptized and to join the local MB church. I did so because I felt that they needed help and I also believed that they would receive it in the fold of the church. But for me personally such a step was totally out of question. I and my wife had been baptized on an experiential faith and we both were fully satisfied with our baptism. I have never been able to believe that the form of baptism makes any difference whatsoever. I believe that God looks at the heart and not the form. If the heart is right the form always is. If the heart is unprepared, no form can compensate for that.

Braun urged me many times to be baptized and to join their church. On one occasion I said to him: "We have lived side by side for nearly three years. We have worked together day in and day out, have done business together, you have been to our house many times. What do you think Brother Braun, do you believe that my wife and I are born against Christians or not?" "There is no doubt in my mind that you both are born again Christians," replied Braun. "In that case, Brother Braun, tell me, where do you have the audacity to bar us both from the Lord's table? We have not been to communion for three years. You and your members take it every month behind closed doors. If you know us to be God's children as you say you do, and if the communion table is the Lord's table, who then gave you the right to exclude us, God's children from it? You have spoken to me many times about baptism and joining the church but you have never considered our position. You do not care a bit about building God's kingdom; the only thing you are concerned with is to increase the membership of the MB church. Do not deceive yourself. I will never, absolutely never, give in to such unbrotherly pressure." Braun was

embarrassed. "Possibly we are not going about it in the right way," he admitted, but nothing was changed and we soon left that district.

In Springstein, Manitoba, also a new settlement, MB's and GC's lived side by side. They all were poor, none had a car, no group was strong enough to make itself totally independent and so for years they had common worship in the local public school. They got along very nicely. Often they invited outside speakers, more from the MB's than from the GC's, and this by common consent. They all loved and appreciated such a man as, for instance, Jakob W. Reimer. I do not know how the matter of communion was handled but I do not recall having heard unfriendly comments.

Then the time came when some of them began to talk of building their own house of worship. They all were to build it together. The initiators in this were from the GC group. The brethren refused to go along with this. Of course, such an act would have created many problems. Was a new church to be organized? Who was entitled to be a member of it? Which forms would be applied? Could they join any conference? These are some of the questions that come to mind. The refusal of the brethren caused dissatisfaction. People became conference conscious. Two groups emerged: GC's and MB's. Two families of the GC's joined the Brethren and were rebaptized. The old unity was gone. The GC's built a fine church, the MB's built one too, less than two miles from the church of the other group. Springstein now had two Mennonite churches. In reality, economically, they had difficulties enough to build one church.

The teacher, Bernhard Fast, an MB, was beloved by all. The MB's now made him their leader and spokesman. This put him right into the middle of the tension. He had to leave. Not that any one told him so but things became uncomfortable and Fast left. Now there were definitely two groups in Springstein.

There was tension and some grumbling in Springstein likely on both sides, but no hostility that I know of. The families remained friendly to each other, there remained a good deal of mutual respect and appreciation, but they all were not able to break through the unseen wall that separated them.

It must have been in the thirties when it was rumoured that both conferences wanted to issue a new songbook for their church services. I felt that that was unwise. In my opinion they should publish one common song book. We sang practically the same songs anyhow, we met at weddings, funerals and other public gatherings. We were often related to each other and our children intermarried. One song book would help to remind us of our common background, bring us together

and also save us thousands of dollars.

I made it my business to talk to the leaders of the two groups. Of the MB's I met with the brethren Heinrich Toews and Jakob Epp, the father of the present MP. Yes, they all agreed that ideally I was right but practically it could not be done. There would be a difference in song selections. I suggested that they could agree on a number of songs, say 400 and that each conference then could add some fifty or so. The new book thus would have some 500 songs and satisfy all demands. No, they said, it could not be done and they went ahead and published two books.

My wife's parents, the Johann Harders, lived in Saskatchewan close to an MB house of prayer. Since there was no GC church nearby, they attended the services of that church for three years. Then they moved elsewhere where there were both groups represented. They dutifully went to their traditional church, the GC, but after some time they wrote us that they had been rebaptized and had joined the MB church. We did not touch on this matter in our correspondence. When in summer we visited with our parents father said: "As you know we have joined the MB church and have been rebaptized. We would never have taken this step if this GC church was like our home church was. But the atmosphere in this GC church is one totally alien to us. Their weddings end up with a dance, the minister's fingers are stained with tobacco juice, he reads his sermons and we find very little satisfaction in them. We simply do not belong there, and you Gerhard, know it. You know that we had to take this step we have taken, don't you?" I said, "Yes, father, I understand and agree that you could not do any differently."

I know of several similar cases.

Melita was a teacher by profession and our student at the Canadian Mennonite Bible College. After graduation she went back to her home in Saskatchewan. After some time she wrote me a letter. She planned to marry an MB, a graduate of Mennonite Brethren Bible College. They wished to be members of the same congregation. To her young man his conference was very dear and he expected to become a public worker in it. But the church would not accept her unless she accepted baptism by immersion. But she had been baptized on a faith experience and she was fully satisfied with the baptism received. What were they to do?

I advised Melita to submit to the baptism the church insisted on. She could not deny the validity of her baptism but she could also not change things

from what they were. She should tell those brethren the truth. She had been baptized upon a living faith and was fully satisfied with it, but in order to be one with her future husband she was willing to submit to a second baptism and join the MB church to which she felt kindly. She wished to become a good member of that church. After some time Melita wrote me again. She had followed my advice but the council of the local MB church refused to accept her on such conditions. She was to say that her first baptism was not biblical and that baptism by immersion was the only right baptism. This, Melita wrote, she could not say. What was she to do next?

I wrote her that I was surprised at the position of the MB church. That in my opinion the MB churches here in Winnipeg would have been sympathetic to her, but in any case, she had done what she could. She could not deny her first baptism. The next move now was to be made by her fiance.

He did. They married and moved to a city. Here they attended a group service not connected to any definite church. Somewhat later the young man joined the GC church. I see the couple, Melita and her husband, at our conferences and their daughter studied at our college. Here the MB's lost a valuable member, in fact two of them, and their children. It just shows how tradition bound and unthinking we all can be at times.

What I have said here was true to about 1940. Since then many things have changed in both conferences. I am afraid that we do not realize this fully enough. We are inclined to judge churches by what they were in the past, thus we have concepts as to what the Chortitza, the Old Colony, the GC's and the MB's are that are decades behind reality. We think of them as what they used to be. Let's awaken, and look at things as they are today.

The main cause of strain between the GC's and the MB's was the fact that the GC churches claimed to be "believers churches" when in reality they were ethnic. This is not totally to be condemned since it has had a great and beneficial effect on our people, but at the same time it offended the Word of God as we understand it. It was this discrepancy that was at the bottom of all our frictions between the two brother conferences. Of course one must add to this also their human fallibility and limitation.

Today things have radically changed. The unspiritual element I have mentioned, simply does not come to our churches any longer. Between the applicants for church membership in the MB and the GC churches is very little,

if any, difference. Both groups come because they want to and this has had an effect on the GC churches already and is going to have an even greater one in the future.

The traditional suspicion between the two conferences today is very much weaker from what it used to be. Our delegation to the Soviet Union in summer 1983, in which we sent one group operating as a unit and consisting of four MB's and four GC's is a wonderful and promising testimony to our brethren in the Soviet Union and also to us here at home.

All the MB churches here in Canada are fairly similar. There is some difference from congregation to congregation but not a very great one. With the GC churches there are still some differences. There is a greater variety so far as preaching, emphasis and handling of various matters is concerned than in the MB churches. In most churches of the General Conference here in Canada the teaching and preaching from the pulpit is no different from that of the average MB church. It is this that eventually is going to bring the two groups wholly together.

Looking into the future I do not see a formal union of the two conferences but a much closer cooperation. I think that it is only a matter of time before the two colleges will be united. It may take two decades or so, but the union will come. Economic necessity will give both conferences the last shove.

MCC is a strong influence for cooperation and mutual respect and will continue to be so as long as it preserves its biblical basis and does not permit the humanistic influence to dominate.

It is possible that in the future there will be a complete re-alignment. Part of the MB's and part of the GC's forming together an entirely new structure.

I am convinced that the strength of the church is the simple, unsophisticated adherence to the Word of God.