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EXPLORING AN UNEASY RELATIONSHIP



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No Mennonite groups have such mixed feelings about one another as the Mennonite Brethren and the General Conference Mennonites. Especially in Canada, the two groups share many things in common--they came out of similar Russian Mennonite Backgrounds, they share a common immigrant history, they settled in the same communities, many families are represented in both groups, they share basic Christian convictions, and they sponsor many common projects.

Yet, as George K. Epp said at a supper which concluded a two-day symposium on MB-GC relations in Canada, November 4 and 5, though the two groups may be together Sunday afternoons, they are "separate Sunday mornings."

The symposium, which was organized by the Center of Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg and the Canadian MB Historical Society, brought together over a hundred participants from the two groups, who talked candidly to one another about ^{their} past, present and possible future relationships.

Epp, a former faculty member at the MB Bible College and later the president of the Canadian Mennonite Bible College, was one of half a dozen persons who presented papers or gave addresses.

The ambivalence in the relationships between the two has a history. Mennonite Brethren once left the 'church' Mennonites in Russia (the forerunners of today's General Conference Mennonites in Canada). For many decades after their beginning in 1860, the most fruitful field for Mennonite Brethren

evangelism was among the Mennonites in the old church. Much of the call to clear-cut conversion and disciplined living of the Mennonite Brethren was seen as an indictment upon the old church.

"The establishment of the Mennonite Brethren church was a blessing for the entire Mennonite brotherhood," said Epp, echoing sentiments expressed earlier by another General Conference participant, Mennonite historian and church leader Gerhard Lohrenz. "But even the most admirable renewal movement loses its justification if the original reason for renewal has been removed," he argued.

That suggested the unspoken agenda for the symposium. Are the reasons for the renewal movement which brought the Mennonite Brethren church into being still there? If they are not, should the two church groups move closer together? If the symposium expressed any consensus, it was that neither of the two groups were what they had been in 1860--they were much more like each other--but reunion was unlikely for many years to come even if it was desirable.

Calgary Mennonite Brethren historian John B. Toews explained some of the reasons for the "unseen wall" described by Gerhard Lohrenz which separates Mennonite Brethren from General Conference Mennonites.

There have been other quarrels among Mennonites which were forgotten, said Toews, but this ^{one} was not. It touched the soul of Mennonites more deeply, led to "mutual sin catalogues" and resulted in "official views" which couldn't easily be swept away. The excesses of "hot spirituality" as one participant put it and the persecution from offended church elders form part of that history. Rejection of stagnant orthodoxy, a new form of baptism, and closed communion, were part of the history for the Mennonite Brethren, while for the General Conference, it was being reminded by "many of the MB's that they considered the GC's spiritually inferior," it was being told that their baptism was not in fact a true baptism,

even if it was on faith, it was seeing people leave in protest to join the new group.

Despite the tension, Mennonite Brethren and General Conference Mennonites found an uneasy balance through the years.

In Russia before the revolution, said John B. Toews, Mennonites literally did virtually everything together except the conduct of their worship services. Schools, hospitals, agricultural enterprises, forestry units, representations to government, were all done together, eventually even church conferences to decide on very important issues of the day. "Each knew," said Toews, "on what levels cooperation was possible and where it was not."

In Canada, the conferences have continued to have many things in common. In the early years, many churches even began by having joint worship services. But as they grew stronger (or larger), they moved apart, even in many institutional activities, though much was still done together.

Several of the papers represented to the symposium explored particular areas of Mennonite church life. Singing, for example. Peter Letkemann, a General Conference church musician and doctoral student at the University of Toronto, discussed MB-GC relations in music. One of the essential characteristics of the Mennonite Brethren was the "new song" they sang, livelier, in four parts, much of it revivalistic, he said.

They provided much of the leadership in Russia and in Canada to a new kind of church singing. The leaders in conductors' workshops for many years were Mennonite Brethren. Eventually many of the singing and choral practices of the Mennonite Brethren came to be shared widely by General Conference Mennonites too. The songs the two conferences now sing are very similar. The ^{main} hymnbooks used by Mennonite Brethren and General Conference Mennonites, for example, have 276

hymns in common.

Letkemann's contention was "that the church that sings the same great hymns of the faith should find it easier to witness and work together," an assertion he took from J.A. Toews, who has written the history of the Mennonite Brethren.

An overview of Mennonite writers was given by Harry Loewen, who occupies the chair of Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg and is a Mennonite Brethren. He suggested that most functioned either as witnesses or as critics and wrote on a spectrum from very much within the brotherhood to pretty much on the outside. Earlier writers were more witness than critics and stood more within than without; later writers were more critic than witness and stood more without, he said.

"When all lines of communication break, the story-teller can restore communication," maintained Loewen. "This holds true for Mennonite literature as well." They can provide us with perspective. One who dominates the Canadian Mennonite literary is Rudy Wiebe, whose work in several novels was described as "characteristically Mennonite Brethren".

The entire symposium ^{begged a question which was} ~~and~~ dealt with in a concluding paper: do MB and GC Mennonites agree or disagree on the basics of their beliefs? Walter Unger, dean at Columbia Bible Institute, Clearbrook, B.C. was asked to answer the question. ^{His answer:} essentially they do agree. Confessionally, the two groups are very close, he said. The focus can be summed up in a three-fold way with "Christ as the foundation, the church as the center and the consummation as the hope"--one Lord, one church, one hope.

Nevertheless, General Conference Mennonites are more open, allowing a wider range on the "theological spectrum" than do Mennonite Brethren, he argued, though "in the mainstream"--on issues like the authority of the Scriptures,

necessity of conversion, discipleship, the believers' church and the mission of the church--they hold cardinal tenets in common.

Baptism, however, continues to be "the water that divides". Unger used the occasion to present the arguments ^{both that the} Mennonite Brethren have made for immersion and those the General Conference have made for sprinkling or affusion. The two groups have been moving together in recent decades, ^{he said,} Mennonite Brethren have accepted those baptized on their faith by sprinkling and are now debating ordination for those thus baptized. And General Conference Mennonites are beginning to practice both immersion and sprinkling and will accept as members persons baptized by either mode. Both are concerned that it be a "believers' baptism".

As though to underscore the shifts, at a ^{November 6} baptism in a Vietnamese-Chinese Mennonite congregation in Winnipeg, totally unrelated ^{to} the symposium, the provincial Mennonite Brethren ^{to} director of church extension baptized six of the candidates by immersion and three by pouring.

Other areas in which tensions exist are the approach to conversion (MBs stressing the initial experience more), church polity (GC's allowing greater congregational autonomy), church discipline (little difference, Unger maintained).

The discussion that followed Unger's paper showed that belief and practice issues still generate the most concern in the relations between the two groups. Several speakers mentioned the long period of informal and formal discussions which had to precede the actions which brought into being the joint MB-GC Bible institute in the Fraser Valley, the Columbia Bible Institute.

One female participant of the symposium suggested that while baptism was not a large issue for General Conference Mennonites, the role of women in the church might be far more "divisive" for MB-GC relations.

Several participants said that the attitudes of leaders was the greatest hindrance to working more closely together. "Members are open to direction, they will come along," said Harry Loewen. We ought to encourage our leaders to be a little more innovative and open, said another.

Senior churchman J.B. Toews of Fresno chided symposium participants for not going deeper in their research. The differences between the two groups were never at the level of the confessions of faith, "the issues were in the perceptions and practices" of the two groups, he said. And issues and tensions between the two groups were also tensions within the GC church.

Those symposium participants who dared to make predictions said they did not consider a formal union of the two conferences likely. Much closer cooperation in church institutions is bound to occur, however, said both Epp and Lohrenz, probably because of economic necessity.

George Epp ended the symposium on a note which cut to the heart: "Do we ever pray for better understanding and cooperation?" What if we prayed for it and that prayer was answered?

Harold Jantz