



"Trends Impacting M.B. Church Growth in the 1990's"

A Response to a Paper by Paul Hiebert - by Jim Holm, Reedley, Calif.

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1 Paul Hiebert has identified eight key issues that are part
2 of the cultural milieu of the late twentieth century in the
3 United States. The Mennonite Brethren are now or will be impact-
4 ed by all of them, both in our existing churches and in those we
5 will be seeking to plant. The issues Hiebert highlights are part
6 of the larger modernity/post-modernity debate. It is not our
7 intention to enter into that debate, since both points of view
8 have their advocates and both are touching M.B. churches in
9 significant ways. However, if this is a time of parenthesis
10 between two world views, then this is a perfect place for the
11 church to be. The church's task is to function biblically and
12 spiritually in the midst of cultural debate and changing world
13 systems. This is not the first crisis time in society nor is it
14 the first opportunity for the church to be the church. But like
15 all times of change, so also now, social transformation will
16 depend on spiritual renewal. The opportunity for the church
17 today is a golden one. The Mennonite Brethren need to be primed
18 to take advantage of it.

19 Consider the issues which Hiebert raises, as they relate to
20 the U.S.M.B. church. Some evidence can probably be found of the
21 existence of all of them in one form or another. For example,
22 like our contemporaries, we have learned to think more in terms
23 of this present world than of the past or the future. Our sense

1 of history is dulled. What we have done in the past is not
2 generally considered important (except when we try to change some
3 procedure in the church), and there is very little emphasis on
4 planning and vision-building for the future. Management by
5 objective is frequently talked about in our planning meetings,
6 but it is seldom done. While we do set goals for church growth
7 and ministry, few concrete steps are taken toward achieving those
8 goals. Our pastors have little training in setting objectives
9 and our churches have little experience in articulating vision.
10 Most of us say that we want to see things change, but in reality,
11 we tend to like them the way they are. We are not famous for the
12 forward look.

13 Our people are also in the midst of struggling with what
14 Hiebert calls the public-private split. There are many among us
15 who see their faith only as part of their private life. However,
16 it is my conviction that there is an emerging core of young
17 people, baby-boomers and baby-busters, who are beginning to
18 believe that spiritual issues must permeate all of life. I find
19 considerable hope for the future in that refreshing core. I hope
20 that it will be a growing cadre of young adults.

21 Concerning individualism, there is little more to be said.
22 In the last several years, several Mennonite Brethren have
23 written and spoken expressing their concerns over excessive
24 autonomy of M.B. persons and congregations. This may be the
25 single most difficult problem that U.S.M.B.'s face. Every pastor

1 recognizes that in his/her congregation, there is a measurable
2 number of people who live for themselves, and who refuse account-
3 ability to anyone. The individualization of opinions about
4 spiritual issues is difficult to overcome. Furthermore, our
5 churches tend toward autonomy. It will be hard to establish a
6 denominational strategy for church growth/planting under these
7 conditions.

8 U.S.M.B.'s have not been an urban people. We are beginning
9 to reach out to the cities, especially toward Hispanics, Asians
10 and others who are not of traditional M.B. stock. But we have
11 never given careful thought to a strategy for reaching the city.
12 Most of our traditional M.B.'s are not ready to think about the
13 city. We have never felt a need to do so. This will be a
14 barrier to overcome. Our mind set and our way of doing ministry
15 do not fit well in the city. We tend to think in terms of rural,
16 homogeneous groupings. But the good news is that Anabaptist
17 theology can fit the needs of the city very well. I believe the
18 M.B.'s in the U.S. are beginning to awaken toward the city. It
19 is true that the awakening has so far been only in our minds. We
20 have yet to encourage many of our people to move to the cities
21 and plant churches. But there is the birth of a new idea of
22 urban church planting, and that should be encouraged.

23 Hiebert writes at length about pluralism. This will be
24 another great challenge to our churches. Our minds tend to be
25 locked into one way of doing and being the church. This seems to

1 be true whether we are speaking of Anglo churches, or of Hispan-
2 ic, Asian, etc. Each of us has learned to function in our own
3 setting and in our own way, and we find no small difficulty in
4 bridging the gap between our cultural distinctives as a church
5 and the needs of the people whom God has placed in our ministry
6 path. While we will need to accept the fact of pluralism, we
7 must not accept the ideology of pluralism. Our struggle will be
8 intense to slide between these two points of reference.

9 There are several foundational principles that must guide
10 our thinking as we prepare for the end of the twentieth and the
11 beginning of the twenty-first century. These principles must
12 help us to deal with the issues that Hiebert has raised. I would
13 summarize these principles as follows:

14 1). **The principle of optimism (faith).** This is a day to be
15 optimistic. While we are realistic in assessing both our present
16 position and our potential ministry, we need to affirm again that
17 God's Spirit is still able to do far beyond all that we can ask
18 or think, according to the power that works within us. In a time
19 of parenthesis social transformation will depend on spiritual
20 renewal. The M.B. church must never give up its hope of develop-
21 ing a vision as big and as comprehensive as the world in which we
22 live.

23 2). **The principle of preparation.** The most important task
24 facing us is spiritual preparation. Now is the time for concen-
25 trated sessions of prayer, for agreeing to be accountable to each

1 other, and for seeking the face of God systematically and persis-
2 tently. Far more important than academic, sociological training
3 will be the concerted calling of God's people on their Lord.
4 This means that our conventions need to be focused on prayer.
5 Our leaders need to come together to pray. Our periodicals must
6 facilitate vigils of prayer.

7 Along with this prayer will go accountability. As pastors,
8 we will have to covenant to own the denominational vision. We
9 will have to call our people to account before the Scriptures and
10 in light of what we as Mennonite Brethren have agreed we want to
11 do in building outposts of the kingdom.

12 3). The principle of fruit of the Spirit. This starts with
13 leadership. The fruit of the Spirit must be released to grow in
14 the lives of leaders. There will be more said at this conference
15 about leadership styles. But this is the time to let joy show;
16 it is the time for our neighbors to see our hope; it is the time
17 for love to be obvious. More than that, it is the hour for
18 praise and worship to become a style of life.

19 4). The principle of planning. Or call it the principle of
20 accommodation. We must be willing to change the ways we have
21 traditionally practiced being the church. Some examples:

22 a). Sunday School needs to change from age-graded
23 groupings to meeting the needs of target groups, to provid-
24 ing support groups for various kinds of hurts;

1 b). we must emphasize the priesthood of all believers
2 to stimulate and promote the active involvement of all
3 Christians, lay and clergy alike. Again and again, we must
4 emphasize that every person has a ministry;

5 c). our pastors and church leaders must begin to think
6 in terms of touching the community with the gospel. We
7 should lovingly hammer home the gentle imperatives of the
8 Great Commission and the Great Commandment;

9 d). we must send our best pastors and leaders out of
10 the safety of established institutions to the frontiers of
11 church/planting evangelism;

12 e). we must combine the concepts and the boards of
13 home and foreign missions;

14 f). we must prioritize the funding of our conference
15 ministries in order to live within our income;

16 g). we must allow people of all ethnic groups to be
17 leaders in significant ways in our denominational and church
18 structures.

19 5). **The principle of community.** There must be an intense
20 emphasis on Christian community. Perhaps it is possible in this
21 age of transition for the church to become once again the social
22 glue that holds the society together. While we cannot build the
23 kingdom of God, we can build communities of the kingdom. This is
24 the day for an emphasis on small groups, on mutual responsibility

1 and accountability. This is the day to pray and to plan for the
2 church to function as a community of believers.

3 This is the day that the Lord has made. It is indeed a day
4 for the Mennonite Brethren to rejoice and to be glad.

Discussion Questions for Use with Paul Hiebert's paper

1. How important is it to discuss the modernity-post modernity issue? Does knowing where one stands on either side of that model make an impact on the plan by which church growth and church planting are addressed?
2. One of the criticisms of the church growth movement is that it has been too obsessed with the management by objective issue. How does a desire for careful planning mesh with the need of prayer and leading by the Holy Spirit?
3. One of the respondents calls for a renewed commitment to prayer. How can this denomination become a denomination that prays? How can prayer be taught, encouraged and practiced in the 1990's?
4. The Mennonite Brethren are seeking to develop a unified strategy for evangelism and church planting. Many believe that the existing level of financial giving is at or near the maximum that can be expected from the Mennonite Brethren constituency. If that is so, some prioritizing will need to be done in order to most effectively use available funds. How should this prioritizing be accomplished and what should the priorities be?
5. It will be necessary to build community while recognizing the existence of pluralism and of individualism. Taking all of these factors into account, what are some ways to increase a spirit of church as community among Mennonite Brethren?
6. How will Mennonite Brethren be moved to develop a vision for the city?
7. It seems that the Mennonite Brethren denomination has had good, high-quality leaders over the years. Yet there has not been significant numerical growth. Is the difficulty a problem of leadership, or does it lie in some other area? Can we increase church planting ability by moving some of our strong leaders out to the frontiers of church growth?
8. Of the trends which Hiebert identifies, which have you seen in your church? What has your church done to deal with those trends, or to minister to people in the midst of them?