

Shifts in Mennonite Ecclesial Gaze Pre and Post World War II

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What I offer here today are snapshots and snippets of a masters thesis project I have been working on for the last two years. These are pieces of an exploration tracing the ecclesial gaze of the Anabaptist Mennonite church between the years 1936 and 1948. These dates specifically mark the 3rd and 4th Mennonite World Conference Assemblies. 12 years and a world war separated the gathering of the global body and over the course of these in these 12 years we observe a church move from looking inward, focusing on their history and identity as a people of God, to a church who *because* of their identity as a people of God are driven and inspired to reach beyond themselves and engage the world in new ways. Using these years of the ecclesial journey of the Mennonite/Anabaptist body as a lens I will then look briefly at today's context, particularly in the United States, to see what we can learn.

1936

What we observe in the 3rd Mennonite World Conference Assembly of 1936 is a church seeking to remind itself of its past and peoplehood. The impetus for the gathering was celebration of the 400th Anniversary of Menno Simons' conversion to Anabaptism, and it was timely in its reminder to the global Mennonite body that they ought to be more united than divided as a part of body of Christ. Socio-politically the times were tense. The assembly took place only months after Hitler violated the Treaty of Versailles by reoccupying the Rhineland in 1936. The world was watching closely as the war again, seemed to be drawing near. Yet, when the Mennonite/Anabaptist body gathered in July of 1936 the dominant discourse centered around history and reflection as national churches shared their common theological heritage and unique pasts.

At best, the need for this knowledge would seem to be entirely impractical given the urgency of the historical moment, at worst the need could be perceived as ignorance. If nothing else, seeking reminder through this agenda was at odds with the current moment; it was unexpected. Surely, a gathered ecclesial body -- one of the historic peace churches no less-- could make better use of its collective time to continue responding to its internal efforts to aid those displaced by Russian war and revolution in the 1920s, or to confront the imminent threat of war, rather than celebrating historical leaders, tracing the historical arc of national church bodies, studying the Bible, and worshipping together. These impracticalities ended up making a lot of sense.

As external tensions mounted and internal differences threatened to rend the church from within, speaker after speaker powerfully reminded the gathered body of its commonality- its knowledge of and identity as a called-out people of God. Christian Neff, representative of the German Mennonite church declared, “This Mennonite World Congress should be an admonition to us to examine ourselves in the light of the past and in the light of the threatening present, an admonition to unite our forces and to strengthen each other in our faith and in our devotion, that we may keep the word of Christ and not deny His name. God help us for His love's sake” (Neff 1937). J. Ijntema, representative of the Dutch Mennonite Church, faces the uncertainty of the time with the unflinching reminder of where the church’s loyalties and allegiances ought to lie. “Thus, we stand ... in a day full of confusion and concern, in a fateful world situation, in a critical hour of world history, for we must find guiding principles which will show us how we can be true to the expectation of the Kingdom of God” (Ijntema 1937). H.S. Bender, representative speaker for the United States, took these admonitions further and reminded the assembled church about the specific virtues which were valued by their Anabaptist forebears but

held relevance to the historical moment in which they found themselves. “Mennonites have always emphasized pure living as of equal importance with right thinking... Freedom, goodwill, integrity, simplicity and honesty—all these are just as much needed in the world today as they were four hundred years ago” (H. S. Bender, *The Mennonites of the United States* 1937). Each of these speakers goes on to emphasize the importance of this gathering in this moment, calling the church to remember and renew its historical emphasis on peace and righteousness with “... new determination” (ibid).

While enmity was increasing, discrimination was beginning to run rampant, and racial arrogance was taking root, these calls to renewed peoplehood encouraged the church to carefully discern God’s call and what it meant to be participants in Kingdom politics. The tone and nature of the Assembly held simple expectations to achieve high aims. Be together. Worship together. Listen. Remember. Connect. Through these simple means, complex and sensitive work was taking place. Where national identities threatened to create strangers in the church, historical storytelling reminded the gathered body of their common roots. Where differing beliefs and practices threatened to split the body into theological camps, recalling identity and unity in Christ served as a reminder to create the space and grace for members of the body to function. The work of the 3rd Mennonite World Conference Assembly was neither a beginning nor an end, but rather a continuation of the church’s sojourn toward continued faithfulness.

It was after the conclusion of the official assembly that the Peace Problems Committee was formed. Together they wrote and released the Peace Declaration- not necessarily as a means of calling the powers into account for the mounting tensions and threats of war (though there was an element of that), but more so as a rally cry to the Anabaptist/Mennonite body to remind itself, lean into, embody, embrace, and re-educate itself about peace theology.

1948

By the end of the second world war the relational capital built in the previous assembly was most assuredly spent. Resentments and tensions had grown between national bodies that threatened to fracture the global church altogether. The French and German Mennonites were barely on speaking terms, congregations struggled to know how to re-welcome young men who had chosen to fight in the war, the strength of a Germanic identity within the implications of what it means to be Mennonite was crumbling, entire congregations in Europe were scattered living as refugees.

The task of the 1948 assembly was set out clearly by the title and chosen theme of the assembly “Brotherhood & Reconciliation.” Four guidelines flowed from the theme which aided to set the framework through which this Brotherhood and Reconciliation was to take place. These were delineated as: 1) To continue to nurture relationships between differing Mennonite conferences and national churches, 2) To share with one another what has been preserved as a legacy from Anabaptist forbearers 3) To create and preserve a Christ-centred spirit within the gathering oriented toward goodwill and common humanity, and 4) To advance the Kingdom of God and witness to Biblical faith, and peace and simplicity in word and deed (Mennonite World Conference, and Peter C Hiebert 1950, ix). These parameters spoke positive intent into fraught dynamics functioning as ecclesial prescripts for what the time as the gathered body was meant to be. These parameters also served to set the tone and trajectory of the global Mennonite church following the Assembly itself.

The overall agenda was broader and more encompassing than that of 1936 – ranging from reflections and storytelling from the European Mennonites of their experiences during the war and their “present outlook” since the end of the war, to explorations of colonization, missiology,

discourses on nonresistance, and ecumenism. The Mennonite/Anabaptist church was beginning in more meaningful ways to find its place in the ecumenical community. The work of the church was no longer held within the enclaves of the Global Mennonite body. To be certain, Mennonites continued in mutual aid and relief work toward one another, however, now the reach of the work extended beyond Mennonite communities in powerful ways. Community Public Service as alternative service in the United States did immense physical labor and most notably embodied and demonstrated love and compassion to those in mental health institutions revolutionizing treatment of the traumatized at the time, the Pax boys served in Europe with rebuilding and relief, and mere days after the 1948 assembly ended, the Dutch Mennonites were at the table at the first gathering of the World Council of Churches.

The Second World War also left complications left in its wake. The journey of meaningfully acknowledging and moving beyond Mennonite complicity to the National Socialist Party has been long. During the 1948 assembly one prophetic voice from Germany did speak: Dirk Cattopel, representative of the German Mennonite church to the Assembly, struck an immediate tone of contrition acknowledging the theological conundrum in which Germany found itself in the years following the war stating, “for the German, especially if he calls himself a Christian, will have to answer this one question before all others: What is your attitude toward all that happened in your country and to other nations through Nazism? In the years since 1945, much has been said about the collective guilt of the German people” (Cattopel 1950, 103). Most striking is his appeal to the Dutch and French Mennonite churches. He states:

But as a Christian from Germany I would confess with all my heart how deeply it burdens us that so much distress, so much cruelty, and so much destruction has come over others through men of our nation, and I would like to appeal particularly to you, my Dutch and French brothers and sisters: during the years since 1940, terrible things have happened to your people through representatives of mine, so much, that from the human angle forgiveness seems impossible. And yet, for

Christ's sake I ask you: Forgive us! And thus, grant us- in the name of Christ- a new beginning of Christian brotherliness! (Cattopoeel 1950, 103)

Cattopoeel's words were at the very least 30 years ahead of their time, with the full extent of this conversation developing in the German Mennonite church in the 1970s. And in some of the colonies in Paraguay this conversation only meaningfully developed as recently as 2017.

Why does all of this matter to questions of renewal now?

Over the course of the 12 years between 1936-48 the church demonstrates the ways in which it reconsiders and grapples with tenants of faith as it seeks a faithful response to its time and place. These responses look different according to what the historical moment demands. In 1936 the church turned to internal relating, and celebration of the elements of belief and practice which were held in common. In 1948 the church had turned its faithful and Christlike response to the wake of disaster and need left by the war. Through these years of growth and development the highest value held by the church was to strive to walk faithfully as a people of God; honoring history and tradition while being responsive to the current context. It was during this period that forays into reclaiming and telling Anabaptist history from a distinctly Anabaptist perspective began in earnest, this period also represented organized attempts at the systematization of Anabaptist theologies. The reflective work of renewal in tension with the external work of engaging ecumenically required new, organised ways of thinking. Fernando Enns aptly reminds us

a systematic theological approach responds to the necessity of self-renewal. Every movement eventually becomes institutionalized and creates a tradition. Traditions build on previous traditions. This process of tradition-building requires critical reflection, and new interpretations conditioned by changing time and space. If this task is neglected, people cannot take ownership of the process of tradition but escape to relativism or fundamentalism. Reflection on one's own tradition preserves

its inner integrity, within which the “heirs” of the tradition can find themselves again. Clear thinking about tradition is important also because tradition serves to define contents and connections that determine liturgy and catechism. (The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community: Ecclesiology and the Ethics of Nonviolence 2007, 85)

Consciously or not, the church was engaged in the work of self-renewal at the end of World War II and served as a watershed moment. The church instinctively knew that it needed to reconsider and rearticulate itself for a post-war context. It was no longer adequate to sit in the comfort of societal assimilation as had happened in Europe before the war, or in societal enclaves as had happened in North America. The church decided that it had more to contribute, choosing to build itself in light of the time and to offer itself to the world. As a result, a proliferation of Mennonite missionaries were sent around the world, Mennonites contributed to ecumenical spaces such as the World Council of Churches, and Mennonites made lasting contributions to their surrounding communities in areas such as mental health care, as well as relief and disaster response³.

Through the relational work of the 1948 assembly the Mennonite church was able not only to reconnect with itself after the long separations and violence of the war but emerged from the war with a renewed sense of peoplehood and the drive to put that peoplehood to work in the world. Paul Toews reminds us

Mennonites emerged from wartime with a new confidence about their place in the national society and with a revitalized sense of their own religious mission. Paradoxically the war nourished an ideal of service and produced administrative agencies to channel that ideal. The demands that wartime benevolence put on Mennonites matured into a theology of active reconciliation that in turn redefined Mennonites’ public life.” (P. Toews 1996, 130).

Fed through the thought and writing of church leaders and historians such as H.S. Bender, ecclesial identity reframed in terms of ethic and character rather than national root or identity. In

other words, the wartime years birthed an action-oriented and ethically focused version of the Mennonite church.

Like in 1936, I believe that we also are living in urgent times. Looking from the United States we find ourselves faced with forms of uncertainty and fear. Donald Trump and the MAGA movement, with both undercurrents and overt messages of toxic masculinity, white supremacy and Christian nationalism, expansionist policies, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, and disregard for environmental concerns carry some echoes of the policies and rhetoric of Hitler's Germany in the 1930s, and others of the world's notorious figures. These are tensions which, though they may feel foreign, point to the sense of false security we have created for ourselves in North America. Now, things that we took for granted are shifting: to be an immigrant (at this point even a documented one); a person of colour; a thinker; a prophetic voice; a university; a library; a lawyer a dangerous thing. I fully acknowledge that is not unique to the United States and that many throughout the world live with far greater urgency, pain, and uncertainty than we do. Israel/Palestine, the Ukraine, India/Pakistan, Myanmar, only name a few places of current intense pain and conflict. Just as the church during the 1930s and 40s found themselves in a watershed moment in history, the church today finds itself in a watershed moment.

Examining the ecclesial shifts of the 1930s and 1940s can serve to awaken and agitate our ecclesial memory and ought to stir the church to not only remember its life and identity in the life and teachings of Jesus but to boldly embody that identity as an alternative community seeking to live rightly with one another and with God.

Looking backward in this way I feel encouraged by a couple of things. Number one, it seems to me that the playbook of an oppressor hasn't seemed to evolve or adapt much in the last hundred years- likely even much longer. Limit and colonize imagination; foment mistrust; find a

people group to scapegoat and spin societal narrative to incite anger and justify violent action; target spaces of innovation and thinking; work to control curriculum in schools; most importantly, cloak this all in the guise of grand and somewhat amorphous promises- Freedom and Bread; Make America Great Again. It may seem strange this as a source of encouragement. But Tolkien reminds us that evil cannot, does not create- it only distorts and destroys. So this is it. We know the patterns; we know the playbook.

This leads to the second source of encouragement. Our history and tradition are the currents that carry us forward; something from which we can draw strength and wisdom. From its fraught beginnings in the 16th century through the damage and tension of the Second World War to this moment our story carries immense tenacity, and we have gained amazing knowledge. Our global body has stretched and grown to over 100 national churches in 61 countries. We are a family 1.45 million strong- and that does not even count ecumenical ties that grow the body even further. We have learned from urgency, struggle, and pain that cycle through our respective contexts. Our collective experience has grown; our sense of peoplehood has expanded. And most importantly we can draw on one another's knowledge and techniques as we continue the struggle against oppressive powers. *This* is where the power of God's creative good can flow through the church, thus enabling us to creatively respond to the oppressor's playbook. We've learned from our Colombian sisters and brothers the persistence of the widow- that even though our presence at times is small we can still effect great change. We've learned from our sisters and brothers in Myanmar the patience and hope of Rizpah- sitting in the pain and grief of their war-torn context yet refusing to give up hope for something better and actively seeking new ways of being. We've learned from our brothers and sisters in Hong Kong who like Paul are willing to risk imprisonment in the name of their beliefs. We've learned from our sisters and brothers in

Ethiopia who like the church of the New Testament were forced underground and proliferated as communities of hope and peace amidst despair and violence.

Putting our hands on the work of faith in these ways is both dangerous and important. We are by no means successful in the struggle all the time. In moments of fear and failure we can rely on the grace and forgiveness of God and the body reminding us that though fear and uncertainty of current times can fog our vision, we can look around us and backward to see hope for the future. The words of Dorothee Soele sum it up best:

*every day I am afraid
that he died in vain
because he is buried in our churches
because we have betrayed his revolution
in our obedience to authority
and our fear of it
I believe in jesus christ
who rises again and again in our lives
so that we will be free
from prejudice and arrogance
from fear and hate
and carry on his revolution
and make way for his kingdom
Amen*

Works Cited