



Family Matters

DISCOVERING THE MENNONITE BRETHREN

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Revised United States Edition

Commissioned by the Board of Faith and Life United States Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches

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The United States Revised Edition was commissioned by the Board of Faith and Life of the United States Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (USMB). Revision was edited by Connie Faber. The U.S. revision is based on the 2017 revision by the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren. Both revisions include much of the work of Lynn Jost and Connie Faber, authors of the first edition of *Family Matters* (2002). Jost and Faber acknowledged the contributions of Katie Funk Wiebe, whose earlier book, *Who are the Mennonite Brethren?*, served as a source of information, wording and ideas.

Cover design and layout by Katherine Hamm

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Introduction

The name “Mennonite Brethren” says a lot about who we are: we are sisters and brothers in Christ. We are, or we aim to be, a family of God. This emphasis on the metaphor of the church as family is a big part of the Mennonite Brethren contribution to the often-individualistic North American Christian community.

The church family is God’s most important institution on earth. The church is the foremost social agent. The church family shapes Christian character. The church is the means God uses to save a waiting, desperate world.

This is the confession of Mennonite Brethren. The church as family most clearly defines our identity. While we may protest that this ideal is not a reality in many Mennonite Brethren congregations, the purpose of this book is not simply to report what is. It is a call to remember what has been and to return to what should be and will be. The church is our primary home. As Anabaptists, we begin reading the Bible, not with the creation account in the first chapter of Genesis, but with the story of Jesus in the Gospels. There we see that Jesus claims that his primary family relationship is with those who do God’s will, who live out the reign of God:

“Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35).

Jesus’ notion of family grew out of his Hebrew understanding of covenant. At its core, the covenant was a family relationship. God promised Abram a family that would become a nation. Marriage and family were the essence of Israel’s identity and purpose. But it was not until the exodus from Egypt that Israel became a nation, a mature covenant community. As Exodus 12:38 tells us, the covenant nation was “a mixed multitude” (KJV), not a blood kinship set apart from its neighbors ethnically. Although Israel had ties to biological family, at its core, Israel was a people of God because of God’s historical acts. By insisting on a family based on ethics not ethnicity, Jesus was consistent with the covenant God made with Israel in the Hebrew Bible.

Jesus called the disciples to join the community of God’s reign. Jesus united the world’s divided communities into a single new humanity (Ephesians 2:11-22). In Christ Jesus, Ephesians 2:19 says, “you are...fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household.” The call to faith, to following Jesus, is a call to become part of the family of God.

Jesus gives identity particularly to those who are marginalized, to those who have no family. In the Old Testament, God explicitly includes marginal people like orphans, widows and foreigners in the covenant people. In the new covenant, Jesus announces good news for the

poor, the lame, the blind, the prisoner. The family of God is composed of “the last, the least, the lost and the little” (Capon). Biological connections do not determine or define the family of God.

Paul reiterates this theme. To join Christ, Paul says, is to join God’s family. He uses many metaphors to describe the church, but perhaps his most significant is the family. He uses the phrase “my brothers (and sisters)” more than 65 times in his letters. The early church met in household groups. Baptism was admitting newly adopted children into God’s family. The Lord’s Supper recalled the daily family activity of breaking bread together. When Acts 16:31 includes the house in the salvation call (“you will be saved—you and your household”), we should think of the Philippian jailer’s entire household including slaves, rather than merely his biological family.

The primary kinship links for Paul were those of the family of God. Whether we like the name “Mennonite Brethren” or not, the “church as family” metaphor aids us in telling the story of who we are. The circumstances of our beginnings—in a renewal sprung from an emphasis on an intimate relationship with Jesus and fostered in intimate group Bible study and prayer—birthed in us a family feeling. The conflict and difficulties inherent in the founding, which involved a break with the existing Mennonite church, further strengthened the need to rely on and be family for one another.

Perhaps no application of the metaphor is more central to the Mennonite Brethren story, however, than the notion of strangers and aliens. As mentioned above, the Hebrew Bible gives privileged place to aliens or foreigners. The historical and theological basis for this special status is the origin of Israel itself. Israel began as a nation of strangers. Outsiders. Because they were aliens in Egypt, Israel is called to provide for strangers (Leviticus 19:33-34; Exodus 23:9; Deuteronomy 10:17-19). Jesus himself was a homeless person with no place to “lay his head” (Matthew 8:20). Repeatedly, the New Testament calls Christians to welcome strangers into their homes. Christians practice hospitality.

Like Israel, Mennonite Brethren began from a common biological stock. All the charter Mennonite Brethren came from German-speaking Mennonite colonies in Russia. They or their forebearers had been migrants from Prussia and, before that, from Holland. Within two decades of the origin of the Mennonite Brethren church, Mennonites began migrating as strangers to North America.

Immediately upon the Mennonite Brethren church’s birth in Russia, there awoke the desire to welcome strangers into the family, whether these be the Slavic people in the area or people in the mission field of India or Congo. Ironically, our story also reveals that, like the New Testament church, we have often resisted or moved too slowly in including new ethnicities within our congregations. Nevertheless, this exciting interplay

of being family, being strangers on a pilgrimage, and welcoming new family members has characterized the Mennonite Brethren church throughout its history.

Getting to know a family well involves discovering its current traits, and it also involves studying its background. The first task identifies those characteristics and views that we might call the family's particular "ethos," and identifies its passion and resources. The second offers some explanation of why things are the way they are.

But does one begin with the present or the past? In this book, we begin with the origins of the Mennonite Brethren church (briefly tracing our roots back into church history) and then discuss our theological convictions. We conclude with a look at our growth in North America, some of our institutions and the worldwide Mennonite Brethren family. The story could easily be read by beginning with our convictions and ending with a look back through history. You are invited to consult the contents page and enjoy the book the way you prefer.

Above all, welcome!

PART ONE

The Family History

CHAPTER 1

The Anabaptist Reformation

Early Church

New beginnings create thrills. A wedding. A newborn baby. Above all, a new church plant. In each case, we experience the joy of a new family begun. Acts 1-8 tells the exciting story of the birth of Christ's family, the church. Jesus' followers, discouraged and huddled behind locked doors, were transformed. They saw the risen Lord. At Pentecost, they were powerfully anointed by God with the Holy Spirit.

The newly established church became courageous, defying opposition and persecution. "Jesus reigns!" they proclaimed. "Jesus is Lord!" they declared. Such assertions, such allegiances clearly challenged the political power structures of Jerusalem and subsequently Rome. If Jesus was Lord, then Caesar was not. Evangelism was met by persecution and even martyrdom, but the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church.

The new reign of God transformed the daily lives of those who joined it. Christians lived as a new family. They worshipped together, ate together, shared belongings with those in need. They studied the Scriptures, excitedly discovering that the Old Testament was being fulfilled with their response to Jesus, the Messiah. They wanted to live new and holy lives, so they accepted the discipline of the church. They discovered that love for God produced a radical love within them, not only for the Christian family but for the others around them.

As Christians witnessed to the power of God, the church spread from Jerusalem to all the regions around the Mediterranean basin. Persecutors, who thought they were defending God and country, hunted and killed Christians. Under pressure, some Christians turned away from following Jesus. Many, however, remained firm in their convictions. For every Christian who became discouraged and fell away, many others converted to the One who could give his followers such courage.

Constantine and Catholicism

By 320 C.E., the church had become so popular that the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, making the church not only legal but protected. In 367 C.E., Bishop Athanasius issued a list of 27 early Christian writings authorized for reading in churches; they were deemed useful for teaching, discernment and theological

construction. These books, together with the books of the Hebrew Bible, would eventually become known as the Christian Bible. This “canon” or measuring rod proved useful for determining the shape of emerging Christian orthodoxy as various and conflicting teachings tried to move Christianity one way or another.

During these contested times, church leaders gathered to test, refine and work out statements of faith on theological issues. The Council of Nicea (325 C.E. and 381 C.E.) defined the doctrine of the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), and the Council of Chalcedon (451 C.E.) defined the nature of Christ as fully human and fully divine. As the basic form of Christian orthodoxy gradually emerged, these centuries were marked by a mix of divisive arguments and of inspiring social reforms (e.g., creation of hospitals and universities). However, hierarchy and sacramentalism began to creep into church life. The increasing use of force to defend and promote the faith brought about what sixteenth-century reformers, including Mennonites, would later call “the fall of the church.”

Despite the church’s commitment to pass along traditions of the Christian faith, creedalism often replaced spiritual vigor. The family of Christ became an institution vying for power and prestige. Abuses of religious power grew increasingly menacing during the Middle Ages. The powerful state church gained enormous wealth by selling indulgences (absolution of sin) and by demanding payment to release loved ones from purgatory. Pilgrimages

and crusades to the Holy Land produced strife in the name of the Prince of Peace. The Mass was often distorted from a celebration of Christ's victory to a ritual aimed at gaining God's favor. The relics of saints were promoted as conveying supernatural power. Money-hungry, immoral church leaders lived like kings instead of serving the King of Kings. The church was losing her vitality.

Protestant Reformation

Enter Martin Luther. The German priest began studying the New Testament, especially Paul's letter to the Romans. He became convinced God offered the divine gift of righteousness to believing children of God. By faith, Luther experienced new birth in Christ.

In 1517, Luther became deeply troubled over the selling of indulgences. Unable to convince his archbishop to support internal reform, he went public with 95 theses or statements, which were indictments of church abuses. Controversy flared. Luther had kindled a fire that would not go out.

Luther began to teach that salvation was a gift from God to be received by faith. He maintained that the Bible, not the Pope, was God's authority on earth. Purgatory, indulgences, relics, the sacrificial Mass and prayers to the saints were churchly traditions, not biblical truth.

In Switzerland, two other reformers reached similar conclusions. In Geneva, John Calvin, a former lawyer,

rejected Catholicism and wrote extensively to develop a thorough theological system. Like Luther, Calvin also retained the practice of establishing a state church. In Switzerland, as in Germany and the Catholic lands, the ruling prince determined church identity. In lands of a Lutheran prince, the church christened Lutheran babies. In the Calvinist Swiss cantons, babies were baptized into the Reformed church.

The other Swiss reformer was Ulrich Zwingli of Zurich. Known as the “People’s Priest,” Zwingli was flamboyant, energetic and a powerful preacher. He preached exegetically—verse by verse, chapter by chapter.

Like his fellow reformers, Zwingli’s study of the Bible led him to recognize the abuses within the Catholic church. With the approval of the city council, he pushed aside one Catholic practice after another. In 1525, six years after he had begun his ministry, Zwingli led a new observance of the Lord’s Supper. Unlike the Catholics who taught that the wafer of the Mass became Christ’s physical body and blood and unlike Luther who held that the bread and wine became the “real presence” of Christ, Zwingli saw the Lord’s Supper as a memorial. He emphasized Jesus’ words, “Do this in memory of me.” Zwingli also taught that the church and its services should be free of “ostentation” (for example, instrumental music). The church service was a place for hearing and teaching the Word of God.

Radical Reformation

Through his visionary ministry, Zwingli attracted a group of young radicals who wanted even more thoroughgoing reform of church life. Conrad Grebel—a bright but rebellious son of high society whose decadent life had been transformed through new birth in Christ—and his colleague Felix Manz broke with Zwingli on the issue of baptism. Following the counsel of civil authorities, Zwingli had continued the practice of infant baptism. Grebel, insisting that the state had nothing to do with church practice, argued for believers baptism.

Under the question of baptism was a deeper issue dividing Zwingli and Grebel: the nature of the church. Was it to be a state church, in which all citizens of a region are also church members, or a believers church, in which only persons who repent of sin, turn to Christ and give total loyalty to Jesus are baptized?

When the Zurich Council ordered Grebel and Manz to stop their home Bible studies, the break was complete. On January 21, 1525, this group met to pray about their critical situation. Moved by the Spirit and with great fear, every person present was baptized and pledged to live in separation from the world. Anabaptism—“baptism again”—was born.

The Brethren, as they called themselves, witnessed to their faith with joy and great courage. Grebel’s evangelistic preaching brought hundreds of converts to know the Lord.

Grebel was frequently imprisoned and his health failed; he died of the plague in the summer of 1526.

Manz, too, though in and out of jail, evangelized and baptized new converts. On January 5, 1527, Manz became the first martyr of the Anabaptists. Sentenced to be drowned, Manz sang from the boat on his way to his death. His final words became a hymn calling for faithfulness in persecution.

The theology of the early Anabaptists, like that of the New Testament church, was developed “on the run,” and much of what we know about it is from the court records of their enemies. A South German convert, Michael Sattler, however, wrote out the basic theology that the Swiss Anabaptists agreed to at a conference in the Swiss village of Schleitheim, February 24, 1527. The Schleitheim Confession stated:

1. Only believers who give evidence of transformed lives shall be baptized.

2. Those who return to a life of sin and refuse to return to faithful discipleship are to be banned from the church.

3. Believers must be united in faith and believers baptism before taking the Lord’s Supper.

4. Christians must live a holy life separated from the surrounding sinful society. The congregation is served by pastors who preach the Word, preside at the Lord’s Supper and provide pastoral oversight to the members.

5. Christians take the attitude of the suffering Christ and renounce force, violence and warfare.

6. Members follow the teachings of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount and refuse to take oaths, even the civil oath, but instead affirm the truth.

Sattler lived less than three months after the Schleithem conference. He was convicted on the grounds of the confessional statement he had helped shape. His tongue was cut off, his body repeatedly pierced with hot tongs and he was burned at the stake.

The stories of Sattler and many other Anabaptist men and women who died for their beliefs have been recorded in the *Martyrs Mirror*. The record includes not only men but also many women who died for their faith.

One such mother of faith was Maeyken Wens who died in Antwerp in October of 1573. Wens, the wife of a minister and mother of five, endured months of torture but refused to recant her Anabaptist evangelical faith. Because of her powerful witness, the court insisted that her tongue be fastened with a screw to silence her witness before she went to be burned at the stake. Her oldest son, Adriaen Wens, age 15, brought his youngest brother Hans, age 3, to witness the execution. Adriaen fainted when the torch was put to his mother's body, but when he came to, he searched the ashes for the tongue screw as a memory.

A letter Maeyken wrote on the eve of her death to young Adriaen has been preserved. She wrote: *My dear son, I hope now to go before you; follow me as much as you value your soul. I now commend you to the Lord. Love one another all your days; take little Hans on your arm now and*

then for me. If your father should be taken from you, care for one another. The Lord keep you one and all. My dear children, kiss one another once for me, for remembrance. Adieu, my dear children, adieu.

Menno Simons

The Swiss Anabaptists were fervent missionaries throughout southern Europe. Eventually, their teachings were also carried north to Holland, where brothers Obbe and Dirk Philips became early leaders of the church. They held to believers baptism, nonviolent resistance to evil and a call to a disciplined church. It was another Dutch Anabaptist leader, Menno Simons, however, who gave his name to the Mennonite church.

Born in Holland in 1496, Menno became a Catholic priest. He was a typical priest of the time, performing the formal religious rituals but otherwise occupying himself with card playing, drinking and frivolity. Three factors jolted Menno Simons out of his spiritual stupor and into leadership in the Radical Reformation.

The first was in 1525, during his first year as priest when Menno began having doubts about the dogma of transubstantiation. As he was celebrating the mass, a doubt struck him: Are the bread and wine actually miraculously changed into the flesh and blood of Christ? In his struggle with this question, Menno did something that would radically change his life. He began a thorough search of

the New Testament. He discovered that the Scriptures did not support many of the Catholic understandings he had been teaching. Menno was forced to make a choice: was his authority the church or the Bible?

Second, Menno was shocked into reconsidering his commitment to the Catholic priesthood by the news that a simple tailor, Sicke Freerks Snijder, had been beheaded because of his rebaptism on March 20, 1531. Though Menno had read some writings that advocated the principle of liberty regarding the age of baptism, he was stunned to learn that the simple, pious Freerks believed the Scriptures taught baptism as an adult confession of personal faith. Turning again to the New Testament, Menno concluded that infant baptism had no scriptural basis. He also found that the retention of infant baptism by the mainline Protestant reformers was not based on the Word of God but on human reason.

At this point, in 1531, Menno was convinced that the Anabaptists were correct regarding three truths: that the Bible, and not church tradition, was the authority in matters of faith; that the Lord's Supper was a memorial commemorating Christ's redemptive act, not a sacrifice of his flesh and blood; and that baptism was an act of faithful adult discipleship, not a christening event to make children Christians. Yet he stayed in his priestly office.

A third shock moved Menno from thought to action. A group of radical Anabaptist peasants got involved in a violent attempt to overthrow the dominant upper class

at Muenster in northwest Germany. Some of the people in Menno's parish, the very ones most influenced by his radical teaching, were swept away with revolutionary zeal. When his own brother was killed in revolutionary battle, Menno could no longer remain silent. From the first, he had vigorously opposed the Muensterite error. Now Menno felt that their blood was upon his soul. The event moved Menno Simons to preach his new ideas openly, beginning in April 1535. By January of 1536, Menno publicly renounced the Catholic church and withdrew to study and write in Groningen in northeast Holland.

Menno's retreat was broken by a visit from a group of believers begging him to accept ordination as an elder of the Anabaptists. Menno resisted, asking for time to pray and consider the call. After an intense struggle, Menno yielded and in 1537 was ordained an elder by Obbe Philips. No one knows exactly when Menno was rebaptized.

The Anabaptists desperately needed a strong leader. Many had joined the Anabaptist revolutionaries and been slaughtered in war. Some had fled persecution, abandoning the church. The remaining evangelical faithful were discouraged, scattered and dwindling. Menno gave himself to the role of overseer of the congregations in Holland (1536-43), northwest Germany (1543-46) and Holstein under Danish rule (1546-61). In 1536, Menno married Gertrude, a godly woman who bore him several children, but he maintained no permanent residence.

He travelled to visit the scattered brothers and sisters, preaching, baptizing, evangelizing and building up the church.

Menno was a hunted man. A price of 100 gold guilders was placed on his head in 1542. One man he had baptized in West Friesland was executed because he had sheltered Menno. Others baptized by Menno were also martyred.

Menno himself seemed to stay a step ahead of his persecutors. During these years, he wrote about two dozen books and pamphlets. His writings helped establish and hold together the scattered, confused, persecuted church. His writings contain substantial doctrinal expositions of repentance, faith, the new birth and holiness. Written for the common person, his books became even more popular when authorities banned them.

Menno Simons was not the founder of the Mennonites. The church bears his name, however, for good reasons. He was a church leader who rallied a scattered people and led them through a time of great tribulation. His character encouraged the persecuted church, for he lived with “deep conviction, unshakable devotion, fearless courage and calm trust” (Bender, 29). And Menno was a New Testament theologian. For him, the Bible was the sole authority in matters of faith and life.

For Menno, Christianity involved both faith and obedience. The Christian was called to live in the way of Christ. Menno’s writings focus a clear vision of twin biblical ideals: practical holiness and the free church. The

way of Christ involves Christ-like love and nonresistance, bold evangelistic witness in word and deed and a complete separation from the sin of the worldly social order. While sometimes criticized for harsh disciplinary judgments (e.g., the ban), Menno was convinced of the necessity of the church as the redeemed community, consisting of brothers and sisters living in holiness.

Menno Simons died January 31, 1561, in Wuestenfelde, Denmark. Menno placed 1 Corinthians 3:11 on the title page of all his writings. “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

CHAPTER 2

Birth of “the Brethren”

Migration to Poland

In the mid-1500s, persecution and evangelistic impulses pushed the frontier of the Mennonite church from Holland to the Vistula Delta of Poland near Danzig. Polish nobles welcomed the newcomers to their estates as farm laborers. The Mennonite immigrants drained swampy lowlands, built farms and, despite restrictions, established churches. For 250 years (1540-1790), Mennonites lived in religious and cultural isolation. They developed a lifestyle of religious tradition, cultural conservatism and lack of missionary vision that caused them to be known as “The Quiet in the Land.”

The area came under Prussian rule in 1772. The pressure of Prussian militarism under Frederick the Great made it increasingly difficult for the nonresistant Mennonites. Mennonites’ refusal to pay taxes to support the state church and the military establishment, together with government restrictions on the purchase of more land

for their growing families, forced them to look for a new home.

Mennonite Colonies in Russia

Many Prussian Mennonites saw the land settlement policy announced in 1763 by Catherine the Great of Russia as providential. Russia was looking for industrious settlers for new territories acquired north of the Black Sea. Mennonites and other German immigrants were promised freedom of ownership, self-government and nonparticipation in the military. Starting in 1788, the Mennonites established German-speaking colonies of small villages with farmlands, church buildings, schools and homes. The early years on the Ukrainian steppes were difficult, but the industrious Mennonites eventually established themselves and by 1860 were a population of 30,000.

Ironically, by the mid-1800s, the Russian Mennonite church had taken on many of the characteristics of the European state church of the 1500s. Church membership was a prerequisite for civic privileges such as voting, land ownership and marriage. To those who completed a catechism class, the church extended baptism without insisting on a personal commitment to Jesus Christ. Church elders began to act as civic authorities. Many elders showed no evidence of discipleship themselves. Church discipline, pastoral counselling and mutual

care were often neglected. Divisions between wealthy members and the impoverished landless class deepened. Public drunkenness, gambling and moral decadence went undisciplined. The ordinances of the Lord's Supper and baptism took on a sacramental character, a sense that the rite itself replaced a need for disciplined Christian living. The Russian Mennonites faced social, economic, intellectual and spiritual stagnation. They were in need of renewal.

Revival Movements

The Mennonite colonies had not been without experiences of renewal, however. Between 1812 and 1819, small prayer circles began meeting in private homes. The groups became known for their study of the Bible and the writings of the early Anabaptists. These reformers sought a reawakening of early Anabaptist principles. Although threatened with exclusion by the ruling elders, this group was recognized by the authorities as the *Kleine Gemeinde* (Little Church).

In 1822, a gifted teacher and spiritual leader, Tobias Voth, migrated from Prussia to the Ohrloff community. He organized prayer meetings and inspired students who later became leaders within the Mennonite Brethren renewal.

In the 1840s and 1850s, another revival emerged, centered in the village of Gnadenfeld. The members of this "Brotherhood" movement had been influenced by

Lutheran Pietists in Prussia and had migrated to the southern Ukraine in 1835 to escape pressure from the Prussian government. The Gnadenfeld church promoted community and private Bible study and prayer, as well as the temperance movement. Most of the early Mennonite Brethren came out of this congregation.

The greatest catalyst for renewal among Russian Mennonites in the mid-19th century was a Lutheran Pietist pastor, Eduard Wuest. After a personal conversion experience, he developed into a powerful preacher. Gifted with a commanding physique, melodious voice and attractive personality, Wuest frequently was a guest speaker in the Gnadenfeld church. He preached a message of true repentance and God's free grace and called for personal commitment to "Jesus Christ, the Crucified." Many who were weary of lifeless formalism were drawn by his message into a vibrant spiritual relationship with God and each other.

A clash between Wuest's followers and the established Mennonite church seemed inevitable, but Wuest died in 1859 at the age of 42 before the renewal could organize into a formal movement. Wuest had prompted renewal, but his own congregation allowed unbelievers to retain membership; he did not promote believers baptism. Wuest was an important catalyst, but with his death the renewal movement turned to its Anabaptist roots for a New Testament concept of church.

Birth of the Mennonite Brethren

Many people had been converted to personal faith in Jesus in several villages of the Molotschna Mennonite colony in the Ukraine. The “brethren,” as they called themselves, met regularly in homes for Bible study and prayer. These home Bible studies were the cradle for the birth of the Mennonite Brethren church. Two developments brought about a break with the old church.

First, several small groups of the brethren (which also included women or “sisters”) requested a sympathetic elder of the Mennonite church to serve them the Lord’s Supper in their own home, in accordance with Acts 2:46-47. They wanted to celebrate communion more frequently, but their request was also a reaction to taking communion in church with people they believed had made no open profession of faith. The elder refused their request on the basis that private communion was without historical precedent, would foster spiritual pride and could cause disunity in the church. In November of 1859, the brethren decided to take the Lord’s Supper in a home without the elders’ sanction.

Second, church meetings were held to decide how to discipline the renegade revivalists. It appeared that reconciliation would be possible. Unfortunately, a few unsympathetic opponents attacked the leaders of the house Bible study movement at a meeting, shouting, “Out with them; they are not better than the rest!” More shouts

followed. About 10 revivalist “brothers” walked out of the church meeting. In all, the Gnadenfeld church lost about 25 members to the house church reform movement.

On Epiphany, January 6, 1860, a group of brethren met in a home for a “brotherhood” meeting. This gathering proved to be the charter meeting of the Mennonite Brethren church. They formulated a letter of secession that explained their differences with the mother church. The letter affirmed their agreement with the teaching of Menno Simons and addressed abuses they saw in baptism, the Lord’s Supper, church discipline, pastoral leadership and lifestyle. Essentially, they were concerned that the church accepted members and leaders who gave no evidence of a redeemed and disciplined life as participants in the ordinances. Eighteen men signed the document. Within two weeks, an additional nine men signed the letter of secession. Since each signature stood for a household, the charter membership of the Mennonite Brethren church consisted of more than 50 people.

A similar, but independent, spiritual awakening spontaneously emerged in the neighboring Chortitza Mennonite colony. It was characterized by conversions, Bible studies and renewal under Baptist influence. A visit of leaders from the Chortitza group to the brethren in Molotschna resulted in a baptismal service. These rebaptized leaders subsequently baptized others in Chortitza on March 11, 1862, the day recognized as the founding of the Einlage MB Church.

Reaction of the Mennonite Colony Administration

The Mennonite church and colony hierarchy reacted swiftly to the letter of secession. The church elders excommunicated the Mennonite Brethren and the colony administrative office prohibited further gatherings of the group, with violators subject to arrest and imprisonment. The colony also threatened exile, corporal punishment, social and economic ostracism and the loss of civic privileges. Fortunately for the brethren, elder Johann Harder of the Ohrloff congregation was more tolerant toward them, preventing administrative authorities from taking drastic action against the new group.

Johannes Claassen acted on behalf of the newly organized brethren group to win official sanction from the Russian authorities and, subsequently, the colony administrators. Claassen made repeated trips to St. Petersburg to obtain government protection and to secure permission for resettlement for some of the group to the Kuban area in the Caucasus. Elder Johann Harder wrote a letter recognizing the Mennonite Brethren as a faithful Anabaptist Mennonite church. Although hostility between the groups was not eliminated by this act, the new group was on its way to recognition and acceptance by both colonial and national authorities.

A new church had been born. The desire for spiritual renewal, stricter church discipline and a fresh start had been realized. Unfortunately, the goals of the new

movement were won at the cost of conflict and division. Some of the accusations against the mother church were too severe. Had the brethren been more patient, they would have seen that the revival which had begun in some of the congregations continued. Perhaps greater concern for unity would have allowed them to achieve their goals for renewal without a division.

Healthy emphases did, however, emerge with the birth of the new church. Mennonite Brethren taught the need for conversion based on the grace of God. Conversion involved repentance—a turning from sin to God. It was not simply a natural process involving learning the catechism. Baptism came to symbolize death to the old life and resurrection into the body of Christ and a lifestyle of discipleship. Communion, which included footwashing, was held more frequently. The church sensed the call to boldly proclaim the good news in evangelism, loving action and mission.

PART TWO

Family Convictions

CHAPTER 3

The MB Church Grows

Early Challenges (1860-65)

“The early history of the MB Church is not only characterized by controversy and conflict in its relations to church and state, but also by internal tension and turbulence among its members,” writes John A. Toews in *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*. The Mennonite Brethren church struggled in its early years to find a balanced approach to leadership and congregational organization.

One of the first issues to confront the new group was the mode of baptism. After a study of contemporary pamphlets on the subject, the Scriptures and the writings of Menno Simons, the church concluded that baptism by immersion was the correct biblical form. Eventually, participation in communion was limited to immersed members only, to the disappointment of a number of the early leaders. One hundred years passed before Mennonite Brethren reversed this stance and allowed membership

to those who had been baptized upon confession of faith, regardless of the mode of baptism.

The emphasis on strong personal religious experience led to another controversy. Worship was characterized by informal spontaneity with the use of the vernacular Low German dialect. Traditional hymns introduced and closed the service, but the body of the worship time included lively contemporary songs, long audible prayers and brief biblical exhortations interrupted by comments from the congregation.

The expression of personal spiritual experience became increasingly enthusiastic. Some leaders misinterpreted Eduard Wuest's "joyous justification" doctrine and began expressing their new freedom and joy in an excessively emotional manner. This Froehliche Richtung (the joyous or exuberant movement) was characterized by intense enthusiasm (including noisy clapping and drum playing), false freedom (including brothers and sisters greeting each other with kissing, which led to moral sin) and spiritual dictatorship (including arbitrary use of the "ban" against those who disagreed with the excesses). The "June Reform" of 1865 reversed this excessive emotionalism. Excommunicated ministers were reinstated and wild manifestations in worship, including dancing, were condemned. The joy of the Lord was to be expressed in a "becoming" manner.

Historian Toews identifies six distinctive Mennonite Brethren emphases true to the early Mennonite Brethren

church as well as today (66-68). (1) The need for systematic Bible teaching is primary. Rejection of lifeless formalism leads to joyous expression, but this must be directed by thorough biblical instruction. (2) Because religious ferment is subject to powerful emotional expression with shallow intellectual consideration, there is a keen need for spiritual discernment. Emotion and personal experience are servants, not masters; obedience born of biblical study is to be our guide. (3) Leadership is to be entrusted to members with integrity and spiritual balance. (4) While strong and wise leaders are needed, dictatorship is suspect and to be rejected. Congregational participation and action are necessary for a strong church polity. (5) A strong ethical emphasis is needed. Happiness divorced from holiness leads to false freedom. Faith and practice must be kept in proper balance. (6) Meaningful church worship is essential. Lukewarm worship opens the door to hyper-emotional expressions. Radical renewal demands appropriate worship forms.

The First Migration to North America

The Mennonite Brethren church in Russia grew rapidly. By 1872, 12 years after its founding, the Mennonite Brethren church numbered about 600 members. Representatives met for the first Mennonite Brethren church family gathering, a time of inspirational meetings and planning for evangelistic church extension.

A committee was elected to supervise the work of evangelism, and five men were appointed to itinerant evangelistic ministry.

From 1874 to 1880, some 18,000 Mennonites migrated from Russia to North America, prompted by the Russian government's plans to introduce universal military service and economic factors. Among the immigrants were many Mennonite Brethren and a group of 35 families from the Krimmer (Crimea) MB Church founded under Elder Jacob A. Wiebe in 1867.

The new settlers experienced all the hardships of pioneer life, including primitive sod houses, grasshopper plagues, lack of markets for their produce and limited educational opportunities.

According to Toews, church life in the early years (1874-79) in North America was also characterized by religious ferment and inner tensions. Settlers from different Russian colonies disagreed about issues such as mode of baptism and relations with Baptists and other groups of Mennonites. In 1878, the first interstate meeting of Mennonite Brethren leaders was held near Henderson, Nebraska, where the primary issue was uniting Mennonite Brethren congregations for mission purposes. An interest in evangelism and mission has continued to bind Mennonite Brethren congregations together through the years. The other early issues seem less significant today, including the "sister kiss," head coverings for women, excommunication, mode of baptism and relations with

Baptists, but these worked against achieving a merger with other Mennonite groups.

By the turn of the century, Mennonite Brethren congregations had been established in Kansas, Nebraska, North and South Dakota, Oklahoma, Colorado, Manitoba and Saskatchewan and, soon afterward, in California, Montana, Texas, Oregon and Washington.

The Russian Revolution and Later Migrations

After 1875, the Mennonite Brethren who remained in Russia began to work in concert with the larger Mennonite church. Joint conferences were held to discuss issues like baptism and the Lord's Supper. In 1884-85, large-scale revivals resulted in conversions, baptisms and growth in Mennonite Brethren church membership. Strong Mennonite Brethren leaders emerged, especially from the ranks of the teaching profession.

The three decades preceding the First World War have been described as the "golden age" of the Russian Mennonite Brethren church. Mennonite Brethren assumed positions of leadership within the larger Mennonite community. Mennonite colonies expanded into new settlements in many parts of Russia; these contained a high concentration of Mennonite Brethren. Educational growth, economic prosperity, forestry service as an alternative to military conscription and the production

and distribution of Christian literature characterized these years.

From its inception, the Russian Mennonite Brethren church actively pursued evangelism and missions. Fulfilling the great commission was understood as fundamental to the church. Risk of imprisonment or exile did not keep people from witnessing to Russian neighbors. Evangelists distributed Bibles and witnessed to the good news. Because of a law prohibiting proselytizing, ethnic Russian converts were advised to join the Baptist church. Participation in foreign missions began with financial support of mission societies and quickly moved beyond it, with the first Mennonite Brethren mission field established in India.

Revolution, World Wars and Migrations

The prosperous golden age of the Russian Mennonite colonies was shattered by the events of World War 1 (1914-18) and the Russian Revolution (1917-18). Because their culture identified them with the German military foe, Mennonites experienced hostile treatment from the Russians. When German troops gained control of Ukraine for a time, the Mennonites divided on the issue of nonresistance, with some forming armed units of self-defense. Later, it was recognized that this was not only a tactical blunder but a violation of their historic biblical nonresistance. The Mennonites of Russia were caught

in the events of the civil war that followed, as well as the terrors of bandit attacks. They experienced the ravages of malnutrition, disease epidemics and famine from 1920 to 1922. Relief assistance by European and American Mennonites, who organized to form the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), finally arrived in March 1922, saving thousands from starvation.

During the time of war and anarchy, Russian Mennonites experienced widespread spiritual revival and engaged in unprecedented missionary outreach to their Russian neighbors. Communist policies allowed for open proselytizing among Russian Orthodox church members for a time. When the Communist government barred ministers from teaching in public schools, many Mennonite Brethren teachers were freed for evangelistic ministry. The revivals of 1924-25 not only fueled the fires of evangelism, but also enriched the Christian experience of many who fled Russia for Canada.

Some 20,000 Mennonites immigrated to Canada between 1923 and 1929, about a quarter of them Mennonite Brethren.

The Mennonites who were unable to escape faced the atheistic policies of the Stalinist regime. Church property was liquidated and religious freedom denied. Ministers were exiled to Siberian concentration camps or killed. Conscientious objectors to military service faced martyrdom.

From 1930 to 1940, anti-religious oppression was even more firmly institutionalized. German occupation of Ukraine during World War 2 (1941-43) offered a brief interlude of relative religious freedom. When the German armies retreated, 35,000 Mennonites tried to escape with them. Some 12,000 eventually reached Western zones in Germany and migrated to Canada and South America.

CHAPTER 4

People of the Book

Mennonite Brethren have been “people of the Book.” Study of the Bible sparked the renewal movement that birthed the Mennonite Brethren church. Envisioning those earliest days of Mennonite Brethren life, various scenes come to mind.

First, one sees small groups of people in some of the Mennonite villages of southern Russia meeting in homes for Bible study and prayer. There is a lively give-and-take around the selected Scripture texts. Discussions are informed by reading materials provided by the Christian Literature Society organized by schoolmaster Tobias Voth. Issues that prompt further study include evangelism, world mission and a growing personal relationship with Christ. The writings of Menno Simons instruct the study. There is a decidedly intellectual stimulus, but the Bible study is not merely academic. It leads to repentance, conversion, revival.

Next, one sees two Mennonite Brethren ministers meeting in the fields as they go about their farming. A controversial question is troubling the young church. How

will they find direction? The two ministers lean against a fence post and reach into bulging coat pockets to retrieve their New Testaments. There are no WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) bracelets on their wrists, but both assume that the practical solution to a real problem will be found in this book. What Jesus teaches through his life and the Sermon on the Mount is the starting point for their search for direction.

Later, we see Bible conferences. Here dynamic preachers expound the Scriptures. High excitement is evidenced by standing-room-only attendance. Tents are erected to contain overflow crowds. The Bible conferences are popular, not only in the Russian colonies but in the Mennonite Brethren congregations of North America.

Finally, we see the church struggling for clear interpretation of biblical passages. Bibles are open, and faces are taut with tension. Biblical study has not produced the expected consensus over the difficult question of freedom in worship. Elders have banned other leaders. Interpretation of Scripture promises unity even as it seems to provoke disintegration. Further study, further work together, is required. Eventually, it is community discernment in the Word, led by respected elders but including all members, that produces consensus, unity and satisfaction that the Spirit has illumined the church community's understanding.

These scenes from the past continue to be replayed in contemporary settings in the Mennonite Brethren church.

Commitment to studying and obeying the Word of God is at the core of who we are.

This chapter reflects on this important quality of our family life. What characterizes our understanding of the Bible? What do we have in common with other evangelical churches regarding biblical interpretation? What perspectives are distinctly Anabaptist and Mennonite Brethren?

Evangelical Pietist Influences

Mennonite Brethren share with Protestant reformers like Martin Luther the formula *sola scriptura, sola fide*: the Bible alone, faith alone. The early Anabaptists agreed that a hierarchical church authority, headed by the pope in Rome, had no right to decree Christian doctrine. Like Luther, early Anabaptist Bible students were experts in reading the Bible in their original languages, and they agreed that the Bible should be translated into the common language of the people. Mennonite Brethren, while lacking the academic sophistication of Luther, shared the reformer's confidence in the Bible as the only guide for faith and life. They also accepted the Protestant canon of 66 books.

Several influences are evident in the Mennonite Brethren use of Scripture. The Mennonite Brethren have been particularly open to outside theological influences. Perhaps this is due to the circumstances of their birth.

The relatively closed Mennonite society of mid-century Russia was opening to a larger world of technology, education, literature and religious ideas. This opening coupled with an intense desire for a deeper experience of God marked early Mennonite Brethren experience. Among the movements that have affected Mennonite Brethren interpretation are 16th century Anabaptism, 19th century European Pietism and mainstream evangelicalism (including fundamentalism, Baptist theology and charismatic movements). More than most other Anabaptist-Mennonite groups, the Mennonite Brethren have been influenced by conservative Christian sources. This openness has both strengthened faithful discipleship and threatened it.

Eduard Wuest, a Lutheran Pietist, contributed significantly to the religious awakening among Mennonites in Russia, and Pietism continues to influence the Mennonite Brethren experience one-and-a-half centuries later. An explanation about the term “Pietism” is in order. Piety, usually a word with positive connotations, describes holy living. Piousness, on the other hand, has negative overtones and is associated with Pharisaic self-righteous hypocrisy. Pietism is a movement that emphasizes the personal religious experience. It carries the expectation that the Holy Spirit is present, active and powerful in producing spiritual growth.

In their book, *Only the Sword of the Spirit* (1997), Jacob Loewen and Wesley Prieb summarize the positive themes

for which Mennonite Brethren are indebted to the Pietist movement. They include personal and small group Bible study; the call for a conscious and personal decision to accept salvation; a deeply-felt encounter with God; warm Christian fellowship; an emphasis on grace, Christ's return, personal evangelism and Christian unity; and a personal sense of God's call to congregational leadership.

Historically, the Baptist influence on Mennonite Brethren can be identified as a separate force. Theologically, however, the Baptists hold enough in common with the Pietists that their influence can be included under that broad stream. Like the Pietists, the German Baptists were accepted because they shared the German language and culture with the Mennonites. Like the Pietists, they encouraged personal conversion, Bible study and evangelism. The Baptists were also important to Mennonite Brethren for influencing a congregational model of church governance, supplying an early confession of faith (that was informally accepted for a time) and reinforcing the decision to institute immersion as the mode of baptism.

Today, Christians who stress conversion, the authority of Scripture, atonement through the cross and ministries of care and evangelism are called "evangelicals." Mennonite Brethren share with evangelicals a concern for personal evangelism, conservative biblical interpretation, personal piety and salvation by grace. We promote evangelical cooperation by joining national evangelical

and mission organizations. We cooperate in broader evangelistic outreach and parachurch agencies.

The historical emphasis on experiential faith and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit has also opened Mennonite Brethren to continuing charismatic influences. Many Mennonite Brethren churches have adopted much of the music and theology of these movements. Charismatic sign gifts, post-conversion experiences of the Holy Spirit and spiritual warfare have attracted interest. Mennonite Brethren continue to converse with one another about the compatibility of these influences with our particular theological perspective.

Not all aspects of Pietism and evangelicalism have positively influenced the Mennonite Brethren church. Loewen and Prieb, for example, identify the following concerns. Emphasis on a personal conversion experience at a specific date intensifies the emotions involved and misunderstands the fact that coming to faith usually involves a process. Emphasis on personal spirituality suggests a private faith and erodes Anabaptist understandings of the New Testament, which places obedience and discipleship within the church community. Historically, the Mennonite Brethren church's Baptist connections created various ethical and doctrinal tensions between Mennonite Brethren and other Mennonites. Finally, the militaristic orientation of the German Baptists and some of the Pietists is alien to the Mennonite understanding of Jesus' teaching.

The Anabaptist Interpretation of Scripture

Mennonite Brethren recognize and appreciate that Pietism and conservative evangelicalism have shaped their interpretation of the Bible. But Mennonite Brethren also hold that their approach to Scripture is distinctive because they retain an Anabaptist “hermeneutic” or method of interpretation. This is seen particularly in their approach to the Bible and in interpreting Scripture as a faith community.

The early Anabaptists practiced a “focused canon,” in contrast to a “flat canon” (Loewen and Prieb).

The flat canon argues that, since the Bible is the Word of God, every word must be given equal weight. This approach therefore concludes that the Old Testament primarily addresses nation states and sanctions the use of military force. The same approach sees the New Testament as addressing primarily individuals and reinforces the pietistic emphasis on individual encounter with God. The flat canon fails to give primary weight to the life and teachings of Jesus, who is seen by Anabaptists as the canon’s center. The flat canon also distorts or misses the Old Testament emphasis on covenant relations, justice and concern for the stranger.

Mennonite Brethren follow the focused canon approach. This practice does not relegate parts of the Bible to secondary status; rather, it reveals the unity of the biblical message. Christ is at the heart of this message.

Nothing in the canon is ignored in the interpretive process, but the meaning of all parts is understood through the life of Jesus.

Mennonite Brethren also accept the Anabaptist notion of “community hermeneutics,” also known as “community interpretation.” This means that our interpretation of Scripture depends on the process of reading and discerning the Bible together as a Christian family.

Community hermeneutics was important in the early days of the Anabaptist reformation and in the birth of the Mennonite Brethren church. It was the issue that caused the Anabaptists to split with the reformer Ulrich Zwingli in the Swiss reformation of the early 16th century. Zwingli allowed civil authorities to limit the church’s practice of, and understanding of, the New Testament. The Anabaptists insisted that the community of faith should read the Bible together, then put its understanding of the Bible into practice.

Similarly, the 1850s renewal in the Russian Mennonite communities was born of Bible study in small groups. The early Mennonite Brethren settled controversial questions by deliberating together as a community of faith and limiting the authority of individuals, even if they were leaders. They developed the practice of Bible study conferences, in which biblical texts were explained and studied together.

MB Principles of Interpretation

The MB Confession of Faith recognizes three specific principles of biblical interpretation. First, the entire Bible is Spirit-inspired. Second, the Holy Spirit guides the community of faith to interpret the Spirit-inspired text. Third, Jesus is the lens through which all Scripture is to be interpreted.

Let us consider these three principles by referring to the MB Confession of Faith (Article 2).

1. “We believe that the entire Bible was inspired by God through the Holy Spirit.... We accept the Bible as the infallible Word of God and the authoritative guide for faith and practice” (Matthew 5:17-20; 2 Timothy 3:14-17). When we confess that the Bible is inspired, we are speaking about the authority of Scripture. The Bible is our guide because it is God’s Word to us.

Mennonite Brethren accept traditional, orthodox categories to describe the revelation of God. We recognize that God speaks through creation, God’s judgments and grace and human conscience; this is called general revelation. But only through God’s special revelation do we learn that God initiated a covenant relationship with Israel through Abraham, Moses, David, Jeremiah and others. Through special revelation, God communicated the very being of God in the person of Jesus Christ. The written Word, the Bible, makes God’s special revelation available to us.

Mennonite Brethren have struggled to find the proper terminology to describe their high view of Scripture. In the fundamentalist evangelical debate of the 1970s, some argued for use of the phrase “inerrancy of the Bible.” For most of those favoring this term, inerrancy described the original documents (as penned by the biblical authors) as including truth about science, geography and history, in addition to theological truth. Other Mennonite Brethren argued in favor of a different terminology. They pointed out that the original documents are no longer available to us. They noted that the Bible does not claim authority in matters such as science and geography. In fact, biblical authors seemed to adopt the conventions of their day in speaking about the universe

Mennonite Brethren have settled on the language in our Confession of Faith to make two emphases. First, the Bible is “the infallible Word of God.” This term supports the understanding that the Bible cannot mislead us regarding God’s will. It is a completely reliable source for revealing God’s Word to us. Second, the Bible is “the authoritative guide for faith and practice.” Our emphasis is not simply on right doctrine (orthodoxy) but on faithful obedience (orthopraxis) as well. The Bible has the authority to call Christians to follow the way of Jesus. The authority of Christ’s life and teaching is passed to the church as a call to church discipline (Matthew 18:15-20). The Bible guides the faithful practice of the redeemed community.

2. We believe that “the same Spirit guides the community of faith in the interpretation of Scripture.” As stated earlier, community hermeneutics is a central and distinctive element in our understanding of Scripture.

In practical terms, Mennonite Brethren community hermeneutics means that Christians are encouraged to study the Bible in personal reading and in small groups. Teachers who have learned to discern God’s will by living in the community of believers and who have received interpretive tools—such as an understanding of biblical languages and literary styles—assist in the interpretation process. However, teachers do not have greater authority because of their academic preparation; they serve the community together with all who contribute their God-given gifts.

When an issue becomes too complex or divisive to resolve in a local congregation, we consult our brothers and sisters. We try to follow the model of Acts 15, where delegates gathered in Jerusalem to discuss the entrance requirements into the church. Mennonite Brethren have traditionally depended on a group of leaders (called by various names in the past such as Board of Faith and Life or Board of Reference and Counsel) to identify issues in need of broader discussion. The board members study the issue and then call for a study conference, where members are invited to study the Bible through small group discussions, written papers and spoken messages. The board then discerns a consensus, which they present as a

resolution to delegates from all churches at a convention, where the resolution undergoes further discussion, leading to a decision.

Community hermeneutics operates with several assumptions. First, we assume that the Holy Spirit is active within believers to illumine the Scriptures. We do not expect new revelation or a new authoritative word from God, but we do expect illumination and fresh insights. Second, we believe it is the role of the community to test illumination against Scripture. Is it consistent with Jesus' teaching, the New Testament, the Bible as a whole? Third, we can expect differences of opinion. Community hermeneutics is tested in times of conflict. While conflict may be healthy (1 Corinthians 11:19), communication in these situations must be characterized by charity and mutual trust. Fourth, community hermeneutics calls for faithful practice, not simply true doctrine. The test of a biblical people is their lifestyle.

3. We believe that "God revealed Himself supremely in Jesus Christ, as recorded in the New Testament." Here our Confession reminds us that we hold to a Christ-centered interpretive strategy, one of the convictions of Anabaptist theology. Jesus' person, life and teaching reveal God, and thus Jesus is the lens through which all Scripture is to be interpreted, and the authority by which it is to be obeyed.

This interpretive principle has sometimes been called "progressive revelation." Some scholars use this term to mean that religion generally, and Israelite religion

specifically, began with crude ideas about God that were refined through an evolutionary process. This is not the view of Mennonite Brethren. Rather, we see the Bible as the story of God's work in the world. As the story progresses, so does our understanding of God's purpose. From the beginning, God works as Creator and Redeemer. As God's work unfolds, we are better able to interpret God's purposes. In the person of Christ, we gain significant new insight into God's will. This new Word, Jesus Christ, enables us to make better sense of parts that were formerly unclear.

We understand that the place to begin biblical interpretation is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and its parallel texts. We take these texts as Jesus' challenge to the church today, not as an idealistic program for some future kingdom of heaven.

Jesus develops three themes in his proclamation of the kingdom of God in which we participate. First, he blesses the poor. Jesus' message is that God's rule is good news for the poor (Luke 4:18-19). He speaks frequently about freedom from the attachment to things. He calls for radical generosity. Generosity as an expression of simplicity is one of the themes of Anabaptist Christ-centered interpretation.

Second, Jesus calls his followers to peacemaking. When we confess our sins, we have peace with God. That inner peace motivates us to pursue peaceful relationships with those around us, beginning with our families, our

communities and even extending to our enemies. We see this as a vital part of Christian discipleship.

Third, Jesus calls for community. Jesus teaches that the only way to practice his impossible ethic is together with our brothers and sisters. Being salt and light in the world is not a call to radical, rugged individualism. It is an invitation to a covenant community, the church family.

The Mennonite Brethren interpretive strategy reminds us that the end of Bible study is not simply knowledge or understanding, but faithful obedience to the example of Jesus. We meet Jesus in the text and discover he asks for extravagant generosity. He models life-giving peacemaking. He invites us to be part of a family that teaches and practices this kingdom lifestyle.

CHAPTER 5

The New Testament Church

Tracing family trees is easier than ever. Through ancestry.com or FamilySearch.org individuals can access distant relatives' birth and immigration records. Genealogy has grown so popular as a hobby that in parts of North America it is second only to gardening.

As Mennonite Brethren, we too like to trace our family back to its roots. We see the first-century church as the model for our life together as believers. We study the book of Acts and Paul's letters for clues about family relations. The Gospels also direct us to what Jesus, our eldest brother, has to tell us about family life.

Interest in our New Testament origins sparks a second interest. How are we related to our closest church family members? In this chapter, we want to reflect on the New Testament church model and some of the family traditions that tie us together as Mennonite Brethren. Just as some biological families stand out because they share the trait of red hair or unusual musical talents, so we as Mennonite Brethren are known for family values that are prominent, perhaps even unique.

Growing the Family

The New Testament teaches that good family life is essential for a healthy relationship with the Father. Just as babies are nurtured best when they are born into a family, so evangelism and conversion are family affairs spiritually. Our Confession of Faith (Article 7, “Mission of the Church”) points to twin truths regarding evangelism. First, evangelism is the responsibility of every believer: “The Holy Spirit empowers every Christian to witness to God’s salvation.” Second, evangelism is a function of our life as a family. “The church as a body witnesses to God’s reign in the world. By its life as a redeemed and separated community the church reveals God’s saving purposes to the world.”

The New Testament church was an evangelistic church. The book of Acts repeatedly records astonishing numbers of people who repent, believe, are baptized and join the family of God. Pentecost, “the birthday of the church,” was an event of corporate witness (Acts 2:2, 14).

The 16th century Anabaptist church, as we saw earlier, was keenly evangelistic. The 19th century Russian Mennonite awakening which produced the Mennonite Brethren church was evangelistic in character. The contemporary Mennonite Brethren church continues to make evangelism a focus. Healthy Mennonite Brethren congregations continue to plan local outreach through friendship evangelism, special events, children and youth

programs and ministries to people in need in their circles of influence. As a larger family, Mennonite Brethren plant churches in North America and around the world.

Redemptive Discipline

In the New Testament church family, discipline nurtured healthy relationships between spiritual siblings and with God. Our Confession of Faith (Article 6) describes the Mennonite Brethren interpretation of church discipline: its purpose is to win the erring sibling back into fellowship (Matthew 18:15-20).

The early Anabaptists described active church discipline as one act that distinguished them from the state church. The 19th century revivalists also were active in the practice of discipline. They chided the “mother church” for failing to discipline pastors and other members for drunkenness and other public expressions of unfaithfulness. Mennonite Brethren limited the celebration of the Lord’s Supper to those who were willing to live within a covenant of faithfulness.

Since the 1860s, the Mennonite Brethren church has struggled to find balance in the practice of church discipline. Church records show that conference proceedings often dealt with questions of ethical practice. In the early years, the conference prohibited things such as carrying life insurance, joking and jesting among members, attending circuses and theatres, viewing television and

permitting women to worship without proper head covering. Many issues of earlier times appear legalistic to contemporary observers, but they demonstrate the seriousness with which Mennonite Brethren have taken the call to holiness.

The Mennonite Brethren church continues to hold expectations about behavior that fits a follower of Christ. Our Confession of Faith (Article 12) forbids the swearing of oaths (Matthew 5:33-38; cf. James 5:12), participation in secret societies and behaviors “which threaten to compromise Christian integrity.” While rules such as these may seem to border on legalism, they also serve as a reminder that the believer is not to conform to the world.

One Mennonite scholar declared that following Jesus means imitating Christ in one, and only one, dimension: radical social nonconformity. Today, Mennonite Brethren struggle with knowing how to be witnesses to the gospel of peace in a society that values institutional violence, affluence and self-gratification. Rejection of abortion and sexual license are values Mennonite Brethren share with other evangelical Christians. We continue to struggle toward consensus on issues such as capital punishment, racism, sharing leadership as men and women and the accumulation of wealth.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper

Every family has rites and passages that define membership. The Mennonite Brethren church celebrates two rites—baptism and the Lord's Supper, which we call “ordinances” or “signs.” Using the term “sign” distinguishes Mennonite Brethren from those who emphasize only God's mediating grace in these acts. Mennonite Brethren are also distinguished from those who emphasize that these rites symbolize only an internal reality. The notion of “sign” is a biblical term, pointing to God's saving acts (Exodus 10:1; Acts 4:16) and to human action (Exodus 12:13). Baptism is a sign of commitment, and the Lord's Supper is a sign of covenant loyalty.

Baptism

From the beginning of the New Testament church, one act publicly identified those who had been adopted into the family of God. Believers were baptized upon confession of faith and were “added to the number” of those who composed the local congregation. Baptism is the rite of passage into the covenant community.

The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) has a single command: “make disciples of all nations.” Two explanatory phrases define disciple making: “baptizing them” and “teaching them to obey my commands.” Why is baptism so important?

First, baptism is “a sign of incorporation into the body of Christ as expressed in the local church” (Confession of Faith, Article 8). Biblically, baptism is described as “into Christ” (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27; 1 Corinthians 10:2-4) and “into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13 NRSV). The phrase “into Christ” describes incorporation into the community of which Jesus is the head. Old distinctions of class, race and gender are erased. Baptism unites very different people, even former enemies, into one body.

On Pentecost, those who accepted the evangelistic message “were baptized and added to their number.” Acts 2:42-47 describes church life following Pentecost: “...the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (v. 47). Both references link baptism to inclusion in the church. One cannot belong to Christ without belonging to the church. One cannot belong to an invisible, universal church without a simultaneous commitment to a local, visible congregation.

Second, baptism means cleansing. In the words of the confession, “Baptism is a sign of having been cleansed from sin. That a person has repented of sins, received forgiveness of sins, died with Christ to sin...” Immoral behavior is inappropriate for those who have been washed and sanctified through baptism (1 Corinthians 6:11). Christ has cleansed the church to make her pure, holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:26). The cleansing power of the cross, which is significant in baptism, turns believers away from their old way of life.

Third, baptism symbolizes the new life of salvation. “We believe that when people receive God’s gift of salvation, they are baptized [They have been] raised to newness of life.” Baptism is associated with new life, life in the kingdom of God and fullness of life in Christ (Colossians 2:12). We are buried with Christ in his death and raised with him to newness of life.

Baptism is offensive to modern sensibilities in several ways. First, it is an ancient rite. Baptism was a common first century marker for conversion to Christianity, Judaism and other religions and may seem like a holdover today.

Second, baptism marks a clear break from the past. In regions where Christians are persecuted, it is baptism that defines the change of commitment. Some people of other religions have accepted the fact that someone prayed a “Jesus-in-my-heart” prayer, yet have ostracized, perhaps even persecuted, someone for being baptized into the community of Christ’s followers.

Third, baptism provokes controversy because it demands commitment to the family of Jesus. In North American communities that lack clear teaching about baptism, it is the commitment to a specific church family that sparks controversy. Some prefer to say yes to Jesus and his universal, invisible body but to say no to the body of Christ in a specific community. Just as the resurrection body of Christ had real physicality, so the body of believers is always a community of real flesh-and-blood people.

Historically, for Anabaptists, this biblical understanding was very costly. Following the Roman Catholic lead, mainline Reformation churches baptized infants to wash away original sin and to bring them within the covenant community. Anabaptists agreed that baptism was the rite of incorporation into the covenant community. But they disagreed that the faith of the parents or the church was sufficient for the event to have meaning. Instead, the Anabaptists taught that each member needed to make a public confession of faith in Jesus to be saved and to join the community of the redeemed. As we have seen in chapter 1, this view of baptism led to bloody persecution.

The 19th century Mennonite Brethren reformers insisted on a return to believers baptism. Even though the Mennonite church in the colonies did not baptize infants, citizenship was restricted to baptized church members. Mennonite Brethren reformers were critical of other Mennonite churches that prioritized reciting memorized catechisms to the neglect of “a genuine, loving faith” brought about by the Holy Spirit.

The birth of the Mennonite Brethren church forced the community to develop its own baptismal practices. How would the new church practice believers baptism? The issue of eligibility was of first and foremost concern. They concluded that baptism is for “those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and commit themselves to follow Christ,...for those who understand its meaning,

are able to be accountable to Christ and the church, and voluntarily request it..." (Article 8).

Candidates for baptism must take the initiative in requesting baptism. The one requesting baptism is given instruction regarding its meaning and the ensuing commitment to the local church. Newly baptized believers commit themselves to the practice of mutual accountability for disciplined obedience. Baptism is seen as a commitment to the lordship of Christ.

Mennonite Brethren congregations have struggled, at times, with the appropriate age for baptism. There is no hard-and-fast rule, but the wording of our confession is meant to encourage young believers to wait for baptism until they can function as accountable church members. Generally, early adolescence has been seen as the age of accountability. By the time they reach adolescence, most prospective baptismal candidates can understand the concepts inherent in baptism and can legitimately confess that they will renounce allegiance with the world in return for membership in God's family.

Another question for the emerging Mennonite Brethren church was that of baptismal mode. Mennonite Brethren settled on immersion. The Krimmer Mennonite Brethren branch had the distinction of baptizing forwards (usually in running water). Today Mennonite Brethren churches are free to immerse in water that best suits the purpose of the event. Some congregations use baptisteries; others find lakes or rivers; some employ tanks, tubs or swimming

pools. Most congregations follow baptism with formal reception of the newly baptized members into the church and with the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is the second ordinance or sign practiced by the Mennonite Brethren church. Like baptism, the Lord's Supper is understood to be a covenant event. If baptism is the sign of entry into the covenant community, the Lord's Supper is the sign of unity with the body of Christ.

Like baptism, the meaning of the Lord's Supper played a significant role in the origins of Anabaptism and, later, of the Mennonite Brethren church. The Swiss Anabaptists and Menno Simons agreed that the bread and the cup were signs of Christ's body and blood. They rejected the Roman Catholic belief that the bread and the cup were changed into Christ's body and blood (transubstantiation) and the Lutheran doctrine that the elements contained the spiritual presence of Christ (consubstantiation).

In Russia in 1860, the celebration of the Lord's Supper outside a church building was an act of defiance that eventually led participants toward separation from the Mennonite church and the founding of the Mennonite Brethren. The Mennonite Brethren held that the Lord's Supper is an event reserved for faithful disciples and should not be celebrated with those who rejected a

godly lifestyle. Further, they requested communion in their homes in order to celebrate more frequently, more intimately and in a context of greater faithfulness.

A series of biblical themes informs Mennonite Brethren understanding of the Lord's Supper. First, the bread and the cup point to Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross. Mennonite Brethren understand Jesus' atoning death as the payment of the death penalty by the innocent victim, as Christ's defeat of the enemy at the cross and as a model for how Christians are to live.

Second, the phrase "the cup of the new covenant" centers on the covenant theme (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-22; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26). As Christ's physical body is one, so the covenant community forms a single body. Fellowship, the product of intimate relationships with Christ and with one another, marks the people of God. The Lord's Supper symbolizes unity.

Third, the Supper anticipates the future, that is, the fulfillment of the reign of God at the messianic banquet celebrated with his redeemed church. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul reminds the church that "you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" with the Supper. The Supper looks forward to the great marriage supper of the Lamb at the end of the age.

The question of who should be allowed to participate in communion has often been controversial. Are only baptized believers eligible? Only those baptized as

Mennonite Brethren? Do Mennonite Brethren hold to “closed” or “open” communion?

In the 1980s and 1990s, many Mennonite Brethren congregations began offering communion to anyone who confessed Jesus as Savior. The new openness reflected an interest in including believers who had not yet formalized their membership, believers who had been baptized as infants but were unwilling to be rebaptized and children too young for baptism. Recognizing the practice of the church, the Confession of Faith speaks of extending participation in the Lord’s Supper to “all those who understand its meaning, confess Jesus Christ as Lord in word and life, are accountable to their congregation and are living in right relationship with God and others” (Article 9). Our confession also acknowledges that the typical New Testament pattern was that baptism preceded participation in the Lord’s Supper.

Application of this biblical principal calls for parents and church leaders to work together to ensure faithful participation in this covenant act. The invitation to participation must always be coupled with a call to self-examination. The church is responsible to practice discipline, repentance, confession and renewal when there is a breach in relationships within the congregation.

The Mennonite Brethren church has no established directive regarding frequency of communion. Practice generally varies from quarterly to monthly commemoration. In the past, Mennonite Brethren

shied away from weekly participation lest the event become superficial and hurried. Now, however, some congregations are celebrating communion every other week or even weekly because of its great significance in the church's life with Christ. Mennonite Brethren believe that the private celebration of the Lord's Supper by bridal couples to symbolize the marriage union is inconsistent with communion's meaning as a uniquely church event.

The New Testament practice of breaking bread together daily and weekly in homes was a powerful witness to their intimate fellowship. The need to balance the New Testament emphasis on the Lord's Supper as a church event and the first century pattern of house churches suggests further reflection together on how the church can best remember the Lord's death, recognize the Lord's body and anticipate the Lord's return.

One other covenant event—footwashing—has historically been associated with Mennonite Brethren church life. Although it is no longer regularly practiced in most Mennonite Brethren congregations, the rite is increasingly popular among younger members as an expression of unity. Footwashing can be a worship event reminding family members “of the humility, loving service and personal cleansing that is to characterize the relationship of members within the church” (Article 6).

Living as a Family

Every family develops routines and traditions. These include weekly household chores, Christmas preparations and family vacations. We have been looking at the traditions associated with the special family events, but now we turn to our understanding of how the church is nurtured from day-to-day and week-to-week. For the Mennonite Brethren family, growth as disciples of Jesus is our primary aim.

Mennonite Brethren hold that discipleship is nurtured within the church community. The primary purpose of church life, we believe, is to nurture our members to live as faithful followers of Jesus. Worship, fellowship, Bible study and outreach all contribute to the growth of the community of disciples.

God equips us for service by empowering us with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Mennonite Brethren believe that the spiritual gifts listed in the New Testament continue to be operative today. We also believe that, since no New Testament list is complete, the Spirit may empower the use of other abilities, such as music or drama, as spiritual gifts. The key to using all the gifts, especially the so-called charismatic or sign gifts (speaking in tongues, healing and prophecy), is that they build up the family as a whole. While some Mennonite Brethren encourage the development of tongues as a personal prayer language, more emphasis is usually placed on other gifts.

Congregational Polity

Mennonite Brethren do not have a prescribed congregational structure. Local bodies choose their own form of leadership structure. An elder board or a church council governs most Mennonite Brethren churches. The congregation is also given a voice in major decisions. Increasingly, larger congregations look to the pastoral staff for initiative in planning.

At its birth, the Mennonite Brethren church reacted against what it perceived to be arbitrary and unspiritual pastoral leadership in the mother church. Insisting on the priesthood of all believers, the church was cautious about giving pastors too much authority. Mennonite Brethren recognized the need for wise, strong leadership balanced by congregational participation. They also quickly recognized the need to unite in larger inter-congregational groups, called conferences.

Congregations set their own direction for local ministry, but they work together in these regional and national conferences to do church planting, world mission, higher education, larger youth events, pastoral leadership development, nurture and credentialing. Currently, the values of localism and individualism are challenging that healthy tradition. Commitment to the larger family groupings will demand continued vigilance by church leaders and fellowshipping congregations.

CHAPTER 6

Peacemaking

Martyrs Mirror tells the stories of 800 Anabaptists who died because of their commitment to the good news. One of these, Dirk Willems, was imprisoned for his faith, condemned to death and emaciated by a diet of bread and water, yet escaped from his second story cell. Pursued by a prison guard, Willems raced across a frozen pond to freedom. The guard, well fed and well clothed, fell through the thin ice. He cried out for help. Since Willems alone heard the cry, he felt constrained by the love of Christ to rescue his foe. Willems was subsequently rewarded for his merciful act by being recaptured and burned at the stake (Bragt, 741-42).

A more recent story of meeting violent threats with the good news of Jesus took place in Kinshasa, Congo. Pakisa Tshimika met Bertrand in church one morning in 1997. Bertrand had recently escaped from his homeland, the Central African Republic, where he had been unjustly imprisoned for contesting election fraud. The military government in Congo plotted to kidnap Bertrand and return him to his country for execution. When Pakisa

became aware of the plot, he and his family decided to provide Bertrand safe haven in their home, knowing that if Bertrand were found, they would also be incriminated.

One day, the presidential secret service showed up at Pakisa's house, threatening violence. Pakisa invited the agent, armed with a machine gun, into his house for tea. Pakisa shared the message of Jesus' love with the agent but refused to release Bertrand. Pakisa asked the agent to inform the people who sent him that they would have to kill Pakisa first before they could have Bertrand. Agents came to the house every day for weeks to threaten Pakisa and his family. Pakisa responded with loving hospitality. Finally, God opened the door for Bertrand to escape to a friendly West African country.

Willems and Pakisa illustrate what Mennonite Brethren believe about peacemaking. Peacemaking is active, evangelistic and Jesus-centered. It is rejection of violent retaliation. It begins when we find peace with God. Peacemaking is a realistic alternative for those who live within the supportive context of the faith community.

Jesus calls us to join the peacemaker family. He opens his State of the Kingdom address (the Sermon on the Mount) with the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12). In the Beatitudes, Jesus blesses peacemakers. By calling them "children of God," Jesus announces that peacemakers are particularly like God. He then offers a series of case studies to illustrate how he came to fulfill the law through a "greater righteousness." The six contrasting statements

show how Jesus transforms a legalistic interpretation of the Law into the active righteousness of peacemaking (Matthew 5:17-48).

Jesus' words against violent retaliation have been the foundation of Anabaptist commitment to peacemaking. Although his strategy has been commonly labeled "pacifism" or "nonresistance," Jesus does call for resistance. But, as Walter Wink points out in his article, "The Third Way," Jesus' form of resistance is the nonviolent resistance of evil. Jesus' words are best interpreted, "Do not react to violence with violence," or "Do not use evil in your fight against evil."

Understanding the cultural context of Jesus' sermon gives fresh insight to Jesus' examples. When Jesus teaches us to turn the other cheek, he is commending a nonviolent strategy of resistance that avoids either extreme of fight or flight. To strike on the right cheek involves an insulting backhand administered by a superior to an inferior. Violent reaction would be suicidal. No reaction would be cowardly. Jesus commends neither. Instead, Jesus calls the insulted, lower-ranking person to "turn the other cheek." This has the effect of forcing the aggressor to treat the victim of violence as an equal. In this example, and in those that follow, Jesus calls for the use of humor and creativity—as well as strength—to absorb the violence, to defeat violent evil.

Active peacemaking is underscored in the sixth contrasting statement (Matthew 5:43-48). Jesus overturns

the conventional principle “love your neighbors but hate your enemies” by challenging us to love even our enemies. Jesus is describing an evangelistic strategy. Pray for your persecutors, Jesus says, reminding us that the Beatitudes are tied closely to the contrasting statements that follow. Peacemaking seeks to fulfill Christ’s mission for the church, to fulfill our Lord’s command to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20). Followers of Christ try to turn enemies into friends. This lifestyle is risky, demanding and sacrificial, but it is the way of Christ.

The only way that the call to radical peacemaking can become a practical part of the Christian life is for the family of God to covenant to be active peacemakers together. The apostles recognized that peacemaking was the fundamental guiding principle for forming the family of God. Jesus came to restore the broken relationship between God and humanity. Jesus created a new family out of formerly warring factions (Galatians 3:26-28). He tore down the barriers that divide people and created a new family in which enemies have been reconciled to live as brothers and sisters in Christ (Ephesians 2:11-22).

The New Testament letters describe members of the believing community as ministers of reconciliation. They serve their enemies (Romans 12:20; 13:8-10), return good for evil (Romans 12:17, 21; 1 Peter 3:9), pursue peace with all people (Romans 12:18; 1 Peter 3:11) and follow the example of the one who refused to retaliate (1 Peter 2:21-25). It is only by living within the community of

peace that members are empowered by the Lord and Spirit of the community to fulfill their ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:11-21).

Third Millennium Peacemakers

The MB Confession of Faith declares that “We actively pursue peace and reconciliation in all relationships by following Christ’s example and His command to love God, neighbors and even enemies.... As peacemakers we alleviate suffering, reduce strife, promote justice and work to end violence and war, that others may see a demonstration of Christ’s love.” Mennonite Brethren apply Christ’s teachings on peacemaking in many contexts.

Peacemaking begins at home. The church is to take the lead in bringing peace to homes and families, to be an advocate on behalf of victims of spousal and child abuse, to foster reconciliation by teaching families to resolve conflict without violence. Mennonite Brethren oppose violence against vulnerable members of the human race. In Article 14, we confess that “the unborn, disabled, poor, aging and dying are particularly vulnerable to...injustices. Christ calls [us] to care for the defenseless.” An example of peacemaking at home is found in Fresno, California, where Mennonite Brethren are at the forefront of the Central Valley Justice Coalition to free those trapped by human trafficking.

Mennonite Brethren are not immune to church conflict. The church is called to be a community of peace where the healthy exchange of differences brings reconciliation. MB churches have at times established covenants that encourage the practice of honest, loving exchanges and renounce gossip. MB pastors are guided by a sexual ethics policy that aims to do away with exploitation.

MB churches are faithful to Christ by showing leadership in helping to resolve neighborhood disputes, racial tensions and animosity between victims of crimes and their offenders. In 2018, delegates to the USMB National Convention passed a statement calling on the U.S. government to abolish the practice of separating families as part of its border policing. Many Mennonite Brethren work in mediation services to bring people together for restitution and reconciliation. We encourage prison visitation programs as well as rehabilitation and re-entry of prisoners into society.

Active peacemaking is also the aim of several inter-Mennonite agencies in which Mennonite Brethren participate. Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) fosters peace in North America and around the world through peace education training, conflict resolution and mediation, trauma healing, inter-faith bridge building and advocacy. Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) works at peacemaking by serving communities that have faced natural disasters. The story of these agencies is told in chapter 11.

Peacemaking begins with restoring our relationship with God, then with our intimate family and friends and moves in ever widening circles: through acquaintances, our workplaces, to the world at large. This leads us to consider how Mennonite Brethren respond to war.

Mennonite Brethren believe Jesus' call to love the enemy requires that we make peacemaking a way of life. Nonresistance is not an awkward accessory that we pull out in times of war. The power to return love for hate comes from our new nature in Christ. The Spirit enables us to live faithfully by providing a supportive community of believers within the family of God.

The early Anabaptists taught that “the use of the sword” was contrary to the teachings of Christ. They opposed the use of force by the state to enforce particular Christian beliefs. The Anabaptists recognized that nations had a legitimate duty to use the sword for police action. Menno Simons witnessed the tragedy of the Peasant Revolt in which early radical reformers were crushed after seeking to defend an independent state; that event helped convince him to lead the Dutch Anabaptists in the way of Christ.

Mennonite Brethren in Russia also struggled with the issue of “the sword.” In the terror-filled chaos following the 1917 revolution, Russian Mennonites organized a self-defense force. There were heavy losses. According to historian John A. Toews, subsequent church conferences condemned the action as “not only a tactical blunder, but

also a gross violation of historic biblical nonresistance. It must always be regarded as a dark blot on the pages of Mennonite history” (Toews, 108-9).

Given the present-day diversity of opinion regarding military and police service within USMB churches, in 2013 the USMB Board of Faith and Life convened a study conference to consider contemporary application of biblical teaching on peace. In 2014 a revised Article 13 was adopted that recognizes both current diversity and the historic commitment to peace.

The revision of Article 13 addresses the issue of military involvement as follows: “As peacemakers we alleviate suffering, reduce strife, promote justice and work to end violence and war, that others may see a demonstration of Christ’s love. As in other Peace Churches, many of us choose not to participate in the military but rather in alternative forms of service.” Mennonite Brethren are grateful to God that governing authorities in North America have provided alternative service for those who choose not to enter military service. The MB church is called “to counsel youth to offer themselves in loving service to reduce strife and alleviate suffering rather than take up arms in military conflict” (Confession of Faith Commentary and Pastoral Application, 150-51).

Peacemaking includes a call to prayer. Followers of Jesus pray for their enemies (Matthew 5:44) and for government officials and those in authority (1 Timothy

2:2). We pray for bold proclamation of the good news of peace (Colossians 4:4). Prayer is part of the believer's spiritual armor, enabling us to take our stand in the great conflict with the principalities and powers of this evil world (Ephesians 6:10-18).

Challenges to Active Peacemaking

Three objections have been raised to military nonparticipation as God's way for God's family. First, doesn't the Old Testament teach that God endorses the use of violence by nation-states? Second, can anyone point to modern examples of this type of radical peacemaking, even on a small scale? Third, should Christians use violence to defend the powerless when threatened by powerful evil forces?

Objection 1: Old Testament War and Peace

For some, God's command to destroy Israel's enemies seems an ironclad objection to the Anabaptist interpretation of Jesus' words. If God orders war in the Old Testament, isn't Jesus simply referring to personal relations? God surely has not changed his mind about war, has he?

First, as Mennonite Brethren, we begin with Jesus not the Old Testament. We understand that Jesus speaks the clearest word from God, and we interpret the rest of Scripture in light of what he said and did. Jesus clearly calls us to love our enemies. For Jesus, our primary

citizenship is in the kingdom of heaven, and he offers no exceptions for citizens of warring nations.

Second, we as Anabaptists note that in the Bible, life and death are in God's hands. God's first act with the nation of Israel was the miraculous deliverance from Egypt through the Red Sea. According to Exodus 12-15, Israel was called to witness God's deliverance and judgment. Egypt, the aggressor and oppressor, received the judgment due their rebellion against God.

Third, the Old Testament includes a tradition in which God's ways are the way of peace. The Psalms speak of God's act of delivering Israel and destroying the weapons of war (Psalm 37:14-15; 46:9). The prophets look forward to a day when war will cease, and Israel will fulfill its role of being a light to the nations (Isaiah 2:4; 60:1-3).

Fourth, when the Old Testament attributes to God the commands to go to war, the battle plans are unconventional by any modern standard. Trumpets and faith count more than weapons (Joshua 6; 10; Judges 6-7; 2 Chronicles 20). Weapons gained as spoils of war are destroyed as part of God's policy (Joshua 11:9; 2 Samuel 8:4). Old Testament wars differ significantly from modern warfare.

This review suggests some of the ways Mennonite Brethren have responded to the objection that the Old Testament seems to approve war. It is noteworthy that the just war theory, a primary Christian alternative to nonresistance, is based on New Testament peace teachings

rather than reference to Old Testament war stories. This just war theory seeks to limit violence by protecting noncombatants. Just war theory is a strategy of last resort, deemed necessary as the lesser of two evils in a fallen world.

Objection 2: Can Christians Live in the Way of Peace?

Some may object: Isn't the Peace Church's interpretation of Jesus' words impractical? Does the way of peace work?

Mennonite Brethren have always been grateful for the freedoms we've received in the nations where we have lived as pilgrims and strangers (1 Peter 2:11). True nonresistance, however, depends on God, not guns, for protection. In the spirit of the three Hebrew youths who refused to worship the image of the empire in Daniel 3, we confess that "the God we serve is able to deliver us,... but even if he does not,...we will not serve your gods or worship the image." Faithfulness is a higher value than freedom. Obedience to God ranks higher than human life itself. So, our ethics are not determined by how well they work. We do not practice peacemaking because it makes us successful. On the other hand, reports abound of how peacemaking produces good results.

Consider these two stories—one from the American Revolutionary War and a second from the recent internal conflict in Congo.

Michael Wittman, a British loyalist from Pennsylvania, spat in the face of Mennonite church leader Peter Miller. Miller refused to retaliate. A few days later, Miller received word that Wittman had been sentenced to be hanged for treason by General Washington. Miller walked to Valley Forge to beg for Wittman's life. Washington asked Miller what Wittman had done for him that would impel him to walk 70 miles to save his friend's life.

"Friend? He counts himself my bitterest enemy," Miller replied.

"In that case," Washington said, "I issue a pardon on the condition that Wittman is charged to your care."

Miller and Wittman returned home, no longer as enemies but as friends.

Safari Mutabesha witnessed the violent murder of his father when terrorists invaded their home in Congo. After fleeing to Rwanda and Burundi, Safari was ministering in a refugee camp in Malawi, part of a self-designated "Menno Group" that practiced peace, repentance and love.

One day a rebel military commander appeared, and everyone but Safari fled. Trembling, Safari approached the man.

"My brother, how are you?" Safari said. "Do you remember me? I'm the son of the pastor you killed. But, my brother, you are good. It's not you that killed, it's the thing inside you that is bad. Come to my house. It's your time to receive Christ."

The rebel accepted, lived with Safari for three years and is now a Mennonite Brethren pastor, giving testimony to the gospel of peace. Safari says, “Because of this testimony the message of peace is now grounded. People see it has teeth. God is using us, the church is continuing, and people are accepting Jesus Christ.”

Objection 3: Does love for the unprotected neighbor permit the use of violent force?

One of the primary concerns voiced at the 2013 Study Conference on contemporary peacemaking was concern for unprotected neighbors under violent threat. The position expressed defended the use of violence in personal situations threatening family members and, by extension, to just military action to defend powerless nations. For some Christians, the willingness to give one’s life to protect another suggests that they may need to take life to defend another. Others call us to trust God to provide a means to restrain evil and to protect the innocent and to suffer with innocent victims of violence.

One anecdote indicates the difficulty of such dire circumstances. During World War 2, federal agents investigated the convictions of a Mennonite Brethren pastor immigrant from the Russian terrors of the 1920s. When questioned about his loyalty, the pastor replied, “I love this country. It has given us freedom. I would gladly give my life for America.”

The agent persisted. “What would you do if violent people would threaten to kill your family and rape your wife and daughters?”

The pastor’s reply sent the speechless agent on his way. “I don’t know what I would do in that circumstance,” the pastor said. “Would you like me to tell what I did the last time that happened?”

Church and State

Closely related to the question of peacemaking is the issue of the Christian’s relationship to the state. The revised Article 13 concludes with the statement that “Because Jesus is Lord, His example and teaching take priority over nationalism and the demands of human authorities.” While Mennonite Brethren have been grateful to God for governments that have allowed them freedom of conscience in Article 12 of the Confession of Faith, we confess that our primary citizenship and allegiance belong to Christ’s Kingdom, not the state or society.

We see the government as part of God’s plan to give order to society. God has instituted government structures (“principalities and powers” of Ephesians 6:12; Romans 13:1-5) to reward good and restrict evil. To the extent that government promotes well-being and maintains law and order, it is acting within its God-given mandate. When governmental demands contradict God’s will, our

responsibility as Christians is to “obey God rather than human beings” (Acts 5:29).

Traditionally, Mennonites have held a separationist attitude toward government. This attitude grows out of the notion, expressed in the Schleitheim Confession of 1527, of two orders, “one inside the perfection of Christ and the other outside the perfection of Christ.” According to separationists, government exists for the world. The state uses coercion and violence to keep evil in check. Christians cannot be involved in such actions. Increasingly, however, Mennonite Brethren have become active in local, state and national governments.

Article 12 of our Confession of Faith reminds us that as Christians we are to “cooperate with others in society to defend the weak, care for the poor and promote justice, righteousness and truth.... [And to] witness against corruption, discrimination and injustice.” We have already addressed the call to be conscientious objectors to military service. What other issues demand a faithful witness?

God calls us to have a broader vision for our corporate witness. In an increasingly diverse society, we are challenged to witness against racism, sexism and classism. We are called to share power within denominational structures with other ethnic groups, whose membership is growing among Mennonite Brethren. We are challenged to respond compassionately to immigrant brothers and sisters, keeping in mind that as spiritual “foreigners” in this world, we are to show hospitality to strangers

(Deuteronomy 24:17-18; Matthew 25:31-46; Hebrews 13:1-2). We are challenged to recognize and resist the idolatrous temptation to put our own economic security ahead of those experiencing overwhelming poverty in other parts of the world.

We believe the Bible teaches that there is a close relationship between social relationships and the issue of integrity and the oath. Mennonites have enjoyed a reputation as people who speak the truth. Mennonites take literally the prohibition against swearing of oaths (Matthew 5:33-37; James 5:12). Refusing to take an oath is a witness to our commitment to speak the truth at all times, whether we are under oath or not and to our primary allegiance to the kingdom of God.

CHAPTER 7

Disciples Are Missionaries

She stood.

One of 1,420 youth attending the 2003 National Youth Convention in Estes Park, Colorado, Joanna Chapa stood in response to an invitation to choose a life of following Jesus.

“There was a session that we were invited to stand from our chairs if we were willing to live radical lives for Jesus and pick up our crosses to follow him, no matter what the cost,” she says. “I remember in that moment I knew I wanted to be about this. I didn’t really know what that meant, much less what was ahead and what he would invite me to.”

As Joanna testifies, following Jesus is about being faithful, one step at a time.

Joanna was a worship leader at GracePoint Church in La Grulla, Texas, at the time. She says chills came over her as more than 1,000 people sang at Estes.

“I sat there most sessions and dreamt of the day that I could help lead worship and/or help plan a National Youth Convention,” she says. “Little did I know, that was actually

the Spirit of God placing in me a prophetic calling or dream into what he was going to invite me into.”

Joanna and her church worship team were asked to lead a morning worship service, and she closed the last session in prayer.

“I remember standing on that stage, looking out to everyone there and sensing within me that God was going to keep inviting me to more opportunities like this in which I would be humbled and in awe of what he does,” she says.

Joanna served on the planning team for the next three conventions, also joining the worship team at Anaheim in 2007, where she says she realized nothing is more satisfying and fulfilling than when God gives and fulfills dreams.

Joanna has continued to follow God’s call. After graduating from Tabor College, she worked with Multiply as a regional mobilizer and has committed to serve as a long-term missionary with Multiply in Peru. She and other members of Multiply’s Peru team are coming alongside the Peruvian MB conference churches in discipleship strategies and the training and equipping of young leaders in a variety of ways.

“My desire is to help train and equip the local church leaders to be disciples that make disciples, that call their churches and families to a deeper intimacy with their Creator and to be missional wherever the Lord invites them.”

Joanna has experienced what Mennonite Brethren believe: to follow Jesus means not only receiving salvation from God but also sharing God's love with others. Members of the family invite others to become part of God's household of faith.

Jesus' command, "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19-20), is the starting point for Mennonite Brethren thinking on salvation. Jesus inaugurated the reign of God, saying, "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). Then he directed the call to specific individuals. "Come," he said, "follow me" (Mark 1:17).

Mennonite Brethren believe that the call to follow Jesus begins with a call to personal conversion. The context for conversion is "the kingdom" or "reign" of God. In his parables, Jesus interprets the kingdom as the community of those who do God's will. The will of God is countercultural, a radical departure from the established order.

Becoming a Disciple

Jesus' first word of command is "repent." Repentance involves a new way of thinking, new action. For Israel, Jesus' announcement of the rule of God meant God was calling out a new people irrespective of nationality or ethnicity. For us, it means getting our minds around the

idea that our purpose has changed. We turn from being centered on self to serving others.

The word “turn” points to the action side of the repentance theme. Mennonite Brethren have used the word “conversion” to describe the turning from sin and turning to God. The earliest revival of Eduard Wuest in Russia, which paved the way for the founding of the MB church, emphasized the importance of conversion. Conversion was an invitation to a sure and personal experience of salvation in Jesus Christ, as opposed to simply a “memorized faith,” as had become the church tradition among Russian Mennonites.

Conversion freed the seeker from guilt, granted peace with God and promised the assurance of salvation. The emphasis on a specific experience of conversion had great integrity when applied to adults who understood the theological principles of the gospel but needed to appropriate it to their own lives. A psychological struggle with guilt and the breakthrough to a new commitment fit their context. Conversion was an event in the larger experience of salvation. Those who converted to Christ gave evidence of a changed life, were baptized by immersion and were accepted into the membership of the congregation.

Most testimonies of those raised in Mennonite Brethren homes tell of children who “accept Jesus into their heart” in a crisis moment at home, church or summer camp. Others accept Christ later in life. Some come to a moment

of conviction and are gloriously transformed. For others, coming to faith is more of a process than a single event. These adults often witness the faithful life of a Christian acquaintance, explore the life of the faith community, hear repeated explanations of the gospel and find themselves confessing their own allegiance to Christ without being aware of a crisis of conversion. The emphasis on a crisis conversion experience, as fostered by revivalism, is not as strong today.

Mennonite Brethren continue to insist on a personal, living faith as a mark of conversion. We use biblical language to say that we are “born again” as we join the family of faith. We are adopted as God’s children.

So, in review: “conversion” is the experience or process by which a person becomes a follower of Christ. “Repentance” is turning from sin to God, an act accompanied by a new mindset that accepts God’s rule. “Salvation” is what God does in giving grace to a sinner. Salvation describes conversion, repentance, faith, baptism and inclusion in the church. Salvation is what God has done at conversion, what God continues to do in transforming us to be like Christ and what God will finish when he receives us into his presence as part of the new creation. Salvation includes the growth in Christ that comes as the Holy Spirit indwells the believer, producing the fruit of the new life.

Mennonite Brethren emphasize that God’s saving act joins us to the community of faith. We grow in discipleship

as we experience the accountability of the body. Our aim is to grow to be like Christ. We grow both as we are nurtured and as we serve others. (See chapter 5 for a more complete description of the way we encourage family members to grow as disciples.)

Global Mission

From the start, Mennonite Brethren have perceived faithful disciples to be both “salt” and “light” (Matthew 5:13-14). Faithful discipleship expresses itself in a life of witness, locally and globally. In the Great Commission, Jesus calls us to make disciples of all nations. According to the late Mennonite Brethren church leader J.B. Toews, the Mennonite Brethren church is a renewal missionary movement. Since the 1890s, Mennonite Brethren have sent missionaries around the world.

In *A Pilgrimage of Faith*, Toews tells the story of the first North American Mennonite Brethren missionary. Peter Wedel was an effective itinerant evangelist in North America. At the 1884 General Conference in South Dakota, Wedel shared with the delegates his growing burden for unreached people in other lands. The conference pleaded with Wedel to continue his evangelistic ministry rather than go to Cameroon, a country known as a westerner’s graveyard because of its treacherous climate and raging black fever.

Wedel spent the night walking the cornfields and seeking an answer from God. Wet with the morning dew, he announced to the convention, “Obedience supersedes all other opportunities. I cannot but go to Cameroon.” Just short of two years from his departure, Wedel was dead, a victim of black fever. His death sparked a dramatic movement. Others followed, going not only to Africa, but to India and China as well. Wedel’s act of obedience became a cornerstone of Mennonite Brethren foreign missions (Toews, 97).

Historically, Mennonite Brethren organized in a denominational or institutional sense out of the desire for Mennonite Brethren convictions to characterize the way we do mission. These convictions reflect the MB church’s evangelical Anabaptist roots. First, Mennonite Brethren mission is inspired by an evangelistic motivation—to proclaim, in word and deed, the good news of Jesus Christ. Second, the effort is church based, both in its sending and in its goal. The covenant community discerns, calls out, sends, supports and receives missionaries. The purpose is to plant Bible-believing churches. Third, mission is kingdom-oriented, centered on holistic ministry to the poor. When the Board of General Welfare (charged with assisting Mennonite Brethren refugees from Russia) combined with the Board of Missions, organization was following theology. In our largest mission efforts, the most receptive response has come from the poorest segment of society.

At first, it was easier for Mennonite Brethren to evangelize in other cultures than among closer neighbors. Mennonites migrated to Russia with an explicit agreement not to proselytize Russian Orthodox Church members. Mennonite Brethren in Russia sent their first missionaries to India, but they also began to evangelize closer neighbors. In the first half of the twentieth century in North America, Mennonite Brethren did evangelistic work among German- and Russian-speaking neighbors. Apart from a mission to the Comanche people in Oklahoma and several city mission projects in the United States and Canada, Mennonite Brethren did little witnessing among English-speaking neighbors. They were much more purposeful in sending missionaries to other countries, principally DR Congo, India and China.

Since World War 2, Mennonite Brethren have been much more active in domestic church planting. During and after the war, congregations moved away from using the German language to avoid identification with the Nazi regime. Many engaged in North American life during the war through their alternative service activities which helped them become aware of social needs, especially in public mental health. Today, both national and district conferences have active programs for launching new churches.

The international mission program of North American Mennonite Brethren began in 1898. Peter Wedel, accompanied by his wife, Martha, and Henry and Maria

Enns had paved the way with their mission work with the Baptists in Cameroon. The first Mennonite Brethren conference-appointed missionaries, N.N. and Susie Hiebert, left to serve among the Telugu-speaking people of India in 1899. Although forced to return because of ill health, N.N. Hiebert became a leader of Mennonite Brethren mission efforts.

Early international mission has been characterized as having a “family spirit.” Sending churches knew their missionaries personally. Congregations were well informed about missionary activities and organized church life to promote missions. Sunday school teachers and parents prayed that their children would be called into ministry. Women formed missionary societies to pray, correspond with missionaries, gather supplies for the poor and raise funds. The church called out its most gifted leaders to administer the mission efforts. Missionaries served extended terms of service, sacrificing family, wealth, health and even life itself.

As a result, churches were established. India and DR Congo, the earliest mission fields with the largest missionary staffs, now number more than 200,000 and 100,000 Mennonite Brethren church members, respectively. After World War 2, mission outreach proliferated, with new fields opening in Paraguay and Colombia, then Brazil, Peru, Japan, Mexico, Ethiopia, Germany, Austria and Panama. By the 1950s, North American missionaries totaled 279.

The middle decades of the 20th century brought turmoil to missions. Revolutions swept out colonial governments. Beginning with the leadership of board director J.B. Toews, indigenization characterized Mennonite Brethren mission policy. Missionary-led fields were turned over to indigenous leaders. At that time, “with the growing international rejection of all colonial imperialism, there [had] also arisen a principal rejection of the missionary-centered gospel ministry.”

Under this emerging attitude, North Americans no longer saw themselves as caring for infants and children but sharing with sisters and brothers. The family relationship matured into a policy of partnership. The name of the denominational mission agency changed from the original Board of Missions and Services (BOMAS) to Mennonite Brethren Missions and Services International (MBMSI), and from 2011 to 2018 was called MB Mission. In January 2018, MB Mission merged with C2C Network, a church planting agency that began as a British Columbia provincial ministry. The new ministry was launched in 2019 as Multiply.

Today, where national conferences are established, they determine direction and invite North American partnership as needed. In 2020, Multiply reported that the mission agency saw 377 churches planted and 5,560 people baptized in 68 nations as reported by 89 global workers and 91 national leaders. Multiply also saw 463 people participate in mission and discipleship training,

12 global partnership video calls with an average of 58 participants and 279 churches involved in global missions through Multiply.

Contemporary Mission Work

Multiply's involvement in Panama illustrates the cooperative nature of contemporary Mennonite Brethren missionary work. The MB Board of Missions and Services began churches in Colombia in the 1940s and in Panama in the late 1950s. Since the early 2000s, Colombian Mennonite Brethren missionaries have been serving among the Wounaán people of Panama in discipleship, leadership training, children's outreach and community development. For many years, Einer and Girlesa Zuluaga of Colombia were the only Mennonite Brethren missionaries in Panama. They have now been joined by a North American worker.

Recently, the Panamanians have begun partnering with the Colombians in the remote Chocó region of Colombia to evangelize, disciple and plant churches among the unreached Wounaán people of that region of Colombia. Increasingly, MB mission efforts are "from everywhere to everywhere." The growing focus for international mission work has been the "10/40 window," between 10 degrees latitude north and 40 degrees latitude north of the equator, currently home to more than four billion people; 90 percent are unevangelized. Some 1.6 billion of them

have not heard the message of Jesus even once. Of the 56 countries in this region, Multiply is at work in 13, through both long-term missionaries and national workers.

Another Multiply initiative is Team 2000. It started in 2000 when six people and their young families made a 10-year commitment to church planting among unreached people in an urban center of Thailand. Since then, this team has been instrumental in planting numerous churches in Thailand and nearby Myanmar. The three couples are now serving on teams made up of both national leaders and missionaries, with gospel influence extending to Thailand, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia.

In recent years, Multiply has shifted its focus from sending out North American missionaries as the pioneer church planters to supporting national leaders and their teams of church planters. This support involves a combination of North American workers helping the national leaders, assisting temporarily with finances and mobilizing prayer. Examples of this shift are now developing in Malawi, the Philippines and Turkey.

Several issues stand at the forefront of Multiply. First, globalization has brought many unreached people groups to our own doorstep. There are now Arabic, Chinese, Ethiopian, Khmu, Punjabi and Slavic (among numerous others) Mennonite Brethren congregations in North America. Japan has sent missionaries to plant churches in Thailand and also in California. Multiply regional directors in Europe and Central Asia and Central and

South America hail from the areas that they direct. The resources for mission are no longer exclusively inside of North America nor is the reach of Multiply exclusively outside of North America.

Second, localization has precipitated changes in partnerships. The North America General Conference structure which previously owned Multiply has been dissolved. Local congregations find priorities that compete with denominational mission efforts. Some congregations have turned their focus from the world to their own neighborhood. Multiply is seeking ways to encourage local evangelistic initiative while continuing to help the larger North American family cooperate to reach the world. Increasingly, the language of “both-and” replaces that of “either-or”: mission is both local and global.

Third, “participation” has an entirely new meaning. In a world where it takes only milliseconds to communicate with someone across the globe, second-hand mission reports lose luster next to first-hand mission experiences. Short-term mission travelers outnumber long-term missionaries. Short-term ministry offers opportunities for a closer look at the international church, exposure to international church planters and the direct challenge to give more generously or to consider personal long-term ministry.

But there are also dangers in relying on short-term missions. Usually, evangelizing with integrity requires time to build relationships, familiarity with the culture and

facility for the local language. A quick, up-close study may in fact provide less perspective than a thoughtful report from far away. Stewardship is also an issue. Are funds diverted from effective, economical long-term projects for exciting but expensive short-term trips? Or, more positively, do mission trips to difficult Majority World situations replace luxury vacations to tropical resorts? Short-term mission endeavors require thoughtful vigilance to ensure that they contribute to long-term church health.

The Mennonite Brethren family is a worldwide clan now. We share a common vision. Jesus calls people in all parts of the globe to be converted, to become members of the discipling community and to proclaim Jesus' good news for the poor.

PART THREE

A Growing Family

CHAPTER 8

Working Together

We use the language of family to talk about ourselves as Mennonite Brethren. Families change and grow. New members are welcomed thanks to births and marriages. We mourn the loss of family members when they die.

A spiritual family also experiences times of celebration and sadness, gains and losses. One loss North American Mennonite Brethren experienced was in 2002, when the United States and Canada officially concluded more than a century of cooperative ministry known as the General Conference.

In 1999, delegates from Canada and the U.S. voted to dissolve the General Conference and transfer its ministries to the U.S. and Canadian conferences. A transfer team negotiated memorandums of understanding for the affected ministries, and a final gathering of the binational conference was held July 25-27, 2002, in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

For some, the three-day event, billed as a celebration, was more like a funeral. There were some who chose not to attend, and others who attended did so with great sadness.

On the final night of the celebration, Marvin Hein, General Conference executive secretary, told the audience of more than 1,500 that he empathized with the sense of loss many were experiencing.

“But,” Hein said with a grin, “we do not boycott funerals when loved ones die. We rarely welcome the idea of a departure from this earth, but we attend memorial services to remember the departed, thank God for the life lived and share in the family’s sadness. We both hold on, remembering, and we let go. It is something of that spirit we need when we bid farewell to the General Conference. We need to let go of what was once a very vibrant part of the kingdom work and now will be replaced by the new.”

Ministry with Canada

For 123 years, Mennonite Brethren in the U.S. and Canada worked together in missions, publishing, seminary education and theological guidance. The General Conference began in 1879, five years after the first Mennonite Brethren immigrants from Russia arrived in North America. It was the first organized conference body for the newly arrived Mennonite Brethren immigrants. Mennonite Brethren in North America accepted the first Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith in 1900, which defined them as a separate denomination and clarified their beliefs.

By 1909 the General Conference was divided into three districts—the Southern District, Central District and Northern District, which included all of Canada. In 1912, the congregations in California, Washington and Oregon formed the Pacific District. For the next four decades, the General Conference structure consisted of these four districts. Then in 1954, Canada and the U.S. formed their own national conferences, each with regional conferences, but they continued partnering together as the General Conference, supporting and operating a number of binational ministries.

When the General Conference was dismantled in 2002, the four joint ministries were MB Missions/ Services International (now Multiply), Board of Faith and Life, Board of Resource Ministries, including Kindred Productions, and Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary. While we continue to work together in global mission, theological education and issues of faith and life have shifted to the national conferences. Kindred Productions became a ministry of the Canadian Conference of MB Churches (CCMBC).

Today, U.S. and Canadian Mennonite Brethren work together in two areas: global missions and historical preservation.

MB Historical Commission

The Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission, owned jointly by USMB and CCMBC, fosters historical understanding and appreciation of the Mennonite Brethren church in Canada, the U.S. and globally. The commission works with a network of four archival centers—two in Canada and two in the U.S.

Since it was formed in 1969, the commission has helped to coordinate the collection, preservation and interpretation of Mennonite Brethren archival records: congregational meeting minutes, conference proceedings, personal papers, periodicals and photographs.

In addition to providing a variety of congregational resources, the Historical Commission publishes Profiles of Mennonite Faith, a series of biographies about Anabaptists and Mennonites who in various ways exemplified Christian faithfulness. These biographies, 70 as of 2021, are published semiannually and are distributed free of charge to Mennonite Brethren congregations.

The commission sponsors four activities—three grants and one internship. MB Study Grants are awarded annually to promote research, creative productions and presentations of theological and historical interest to Mennonite Brethren. The Katie Funk Wiebe Research Grant promotes research on the history and contributions of Mennonite Brethren women around the world. The annual Archival Development Grant supports the

development of Mennonite archives around the world. The Historical Commission also sponsors a summer archival internship for a U.S. or Canadian college or seminary student to gain practical archival experience at the North American Mennonite Brethren archival institutions.

Multiply

As recorded elsewhere in this book, mission is at the center of Mennonite Brethren identity. It was the dominant theme in the work and meetings of the General Conference for 120 years. From 1880 to 1948, the first item of business on the conference agenda was always mission—evangelism, home mission and foreign mission. Mission always received a greater amount of financial support from Mennonite Brethren churches than any other cause. Since the 1880s, most of the major Mennonite Brethren leaders in North America have at some time in their public ministry been missionaries, evangelists, church planters or mission board members.

The North American global mission efforts have been known by various names and is currently called Multiply. Multiply was formed in 2019 when MB Mission merged with C2C Network, the CCMBC church planting ministry. The merger was part of a new mission vision that North American Mennonite Brethren would live on mission locally, nationally and globally. Multiply was launched as a

cross-denominational ministry that would facilitate church planting locally, nationally and globally.

The merger did not go well and after six months Multiply released the multi-denominational church planting aspects of its ministry. The Multiply Board of Directors, which consists of representatives elected by USMB and CCMBC and members appointed by the board, requested that CCMBC and USMB conduct a review of the ministry. That review, completed with the help of a consultant, led to several changes that continue to unfold. The Multiply Board, newly appointed in 2020, is currently searching for a new Multiply general director.

Financial concerns that, in part, led to the de-merger of Multiply and C2C have been addressed. Multiply continues to train and send both long- and short-term workers to engage in holistic church planting among the least reached.

Working together in the U.S.

Today, U.S. Mennonite Brethren not only cooperate in ministry with our Canadian family members but also with one another here in the United States. Some of these shared ministries were once national or binational partnerships while others were initiated to specifically serve Mennonite Brethren in the U.S.

Higher Education

Soon after their arrival in North America, Mennonite Brethren sensed the need to provide college education for church leadership. In 1908, with local MB leadership, Tabor College and Academy in Hillsboro, Kansas, began to offer Christian liberal arts education. The late historian John A. Toews writes that Tabor's "spiritual impact on the educational and missionary endeavors of the MB conference can hardly be overestimated" in its role as "the chief training ground for church leadership" (MB History, 273).

The shift from lay ministers to professional pastors in the 1930s and 40s in the U.S. and in Canada within the next decade precipitated a concern for denominational pastoral training. Regional and national needs led to changes in Tabor College's role as the sole provider of higher education for the denomination in Canada and the U.S. In 1944, two more schools (which eventually evolved into universities) began offering classes: Pacific Bible Institute in Fresno, California, and Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg, Manitoba. In 1954, the binational MB higher education program was nationalized. The U.S. Conference took responsibility for Tabor College and Pacific Bible Institute (now Fresno Pacific University.)

Today, Tabor College is owned by the Central District Conference, Eastern District Conference, Latin America MB Conference and Southern District Conference. Each

district conference has a representative on the Tabor College Board of Directors.

As of 2020, 38 states and 15 countries were represented on the residential campus of about 500 students. Tabor College offers 29 bachelor's degree programs, four master's degree programs and eight online programs. Many students are involved in the fine arts, 20 student-led organizations and 19 varsity sports teams.

Fresno Pacific University is owned by the Pacific District Conference. In addition to the main campus in southeast Fresno and an online program, the university has four additional centers in the Central Valley—North Fresno, Bakersfield, Merced and Visalia. FPU offers undergraduate students more than 30 degree options and more than 100 areas of study as well as 45 distinctive graduate programs.

About 4,000 traditional-age undergraduate, adult degree completion and graduate students are enrolled at FPU. More than 6,000 education and business professionals take continuing education courses. Many students are the first in their families to attend college. Sunbird athletic teams compete in 15 sports.

In 2010, Fresno Pacific University took ownership of Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (MBBS), now Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary. The U.S. Conference (USMB) founded MBBS in 1955, and Pacific Bible Institute and Tabor College provided senior faculty members as teachers and administrators. In the 1960s,

during the presidency of J.B. Toews, the seminary established itself as an Anabaptist learning center, emphasizing biblical theology and practical congregational ministry.

For 20 years, beginning in 1975, MBBS was sponsored by both CCMBC and USMB. During this time, the Fresno seminary served Mennonite Brethren from Canada, the U.S. and around the world. In 1995, the need for an increase in the number of trained pastors, coupled with the desire of many potential seminary students to study closer to home, resulted in the launch of MBBS teaching centers in Abbotsford and Winnipeg. In 1999, MBBS became a full member of the Association of Canadian Theological Seminaries (ACTS) located on the campus of Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia. By 2010, declining enrollments and budget constraints had led to the conclusion that the Fresno campus was no longer viable on its own. So, in June 2010, the seminary property in Fresno was transferred to Fresno Pacific University.

Today Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary offers an M.Div. degree as well as M.A. degrees in marriage family therapy, Christian ministries, Old Testament, New Testament, theology and urban mission. Three centers within the seminary provide unique training: Center for Community Transformation, Center for Anabaptist Studies and On-Site Counseling Center.

MB Foundation

Turning 30 is a significant milestone for many people. For some, it marks the end of youth, while others see it as the beginning of adulthood. For MB Foundation, it was the latter. The stewardship ministry of U.S. Mennonite Brethren celebrated the 30th anniversary of its incorporation in 2020.

While the stewardship ministry was incorporated in 1990, the work and ministry of stewarding resources for the Mennonite Brethren family began in 1880. “Thirty years reflects maturity; 140 years reflects longevity and strength—additional important attributes for a fiduciary to have,” said Jon Wiebe, MB Foundation president and CEO, in an interview at the time.

The early roots of Mennonite Brethren stewardship date back to 1880 when immigrants to the U.S. began gathering funds from churches to support evangelistic work in North America and around the world. By 1898 the conference set a goal of increasing the Mission Fund to a \$50,000 endowment. In 1904 the conference received its first planned gift of 80 acres of farmland.

As the North American General Conference grew, so did its efforts to support mission efforts and education by collecting, investing and loaning funds. In 1908 the Board of Trustees was created to focus on legal and property issues. Working under the Board of Trustees was the Financial Administrative Committee that in 1933 became

the Stewardship Committee, charged with caring for money donated to the Mission Fund and the Educational Endowment Fund, created in 1924.

Continued growth prompted the Board of Trustees in 1972 to create an official Stewardship Department to develop a planned giving program geared toward educating constituents in the U.S. and Canada. By 1987 it became apparent that localized management would better serve the respective conferences. And so, in the U.S., MB Stewardship Ministries was formed to provide gift planning, stewardship education, estate planning, financial management, endowment fund management, an investment program and loans.

Soon after, Stewardship Ministries staff and board began to explore forming a foundation. After many meetings and discussions, the U.S. Conference approved the move. When MB Foundation was incorporated in 1990, it did so with \$16 million in assets, \$10.5 million in loans, \$12.8 million in certificates and five staff members. At the time of its 30th anniversary, MB Foundation was a \$251 million corporation with a staff of 20.

The mission of MB Foundation is to encourage and assist individuals, congregations and ministries in the Mennonite Brethren community with biblical financial stewardship solutions. In addition to offering a variety of financial services, MB Foundation serves USMB through the Leadership Generation Fund (LeadGen) to provide scholarships to young adults who are exploring ministry

opportunities and through Celebrate!, national gatherings designed for boomers, builders and empty-nesters. MB Foundation established the COVID-19 Church Relief Fund in April 2020 to assist Mennonite Brethren churches during the pandemic. The fund was closed at the end of 2021 and remaining funds were directed to church planting, as originally planned.

CHAPTER 9

Mennonite Brethren in the U.S.

Growth and change within a family prompt many a home remodeling project. Remodeling is messy, as walls are knocked down, spaces reconfigured and rooms added. Some remodeling projects are detoured by unexpected obstacles and more times than not the price tag increases thanks to unforeseen expenses. But when all is said and done—when tidiness is restored and displaced belongings have found a home—the family appreciates the ways in which the changes have improved or enhanced their home.

In the early 2000s, U.S. Mennonite Brethren significantly revamped their “home” — the United States Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (USMB). While the structure that housed ministries changed, the commitment to grow the church and disciple believers remained the same. In this sense, the changes did not represent an “extreme” makeover.

Efforts to strengthen the national conference were initiated in 2000 as USMB and the Canadian Conference

of MB Churches (CCMBC) began the process of dissolving the binational General Conference. While CCMBC's national structure was well developed, USMB ministries were less so and stood in the shadow of a strong binational conference. USMB leaders recognized the need for a new vision and new leadership to help answer the question, "What's next?"

That same question was raised in the late 1980s, and in 1988, USMB adopted numeric goals for planting new churches and calling out and preparing leaders for these new churches. The goals of "Vision 2000" were to see USMB grow to 25,000 members and 180 congregations by the year 2000. Specifically, local congregations were challenged to grow, and the districts, with the help of the national conference, would establish five new churches per year with 30 of these churches being started among different ethnic peoples. Leaders would be needed for these new churches. Established congregations were asked to call out and help prepare two percent of their membership for leadership roles in pastoral ministry and missions.

Two ministries emerged to meet these goals. Integrated Ministries, a new effort led by Loyal Funk, connected with churches formed among immigrant communities. As a result of Integrated Ministries, the USMB family grew to include Slavic/Russian, Korean, Hispanic, Japanese, Ethiopian and Chinese congregations.

Mission USA was formed in 1996 to focus on planting new churches and renewing existing churches as well as leadership development. Mission USA executive director Ed Boschman led the effort and new churches were planted in Arizona, Utah, Nebraska, Oklahoma and elsewhere.

Coming into the 21st century, the numeric goals of Vision 2000 had been met. USMB numbered 180 congregations with a total membership of 26,219. Forty-five transcultural congregations were welcomed, exceeding the goal of 30. As USMB leaders considered the future, three goals emerged: securing a full-time national executive director, coordinated church planting by Mission USA in metro centers around the U.S. with the goal of planting 20 new churches by 2005 and hiring a team of part-time regional fundraisers to solicit funds for Mission USA and other ministries, including work done by the General Conference that would move to the national level.

Delegates to the 2000 USMB convention embraced this energetic vision and affirmed a national budget of nearly \$1 million. It appeared that the USMB “remodel” was going in the right direction. But things did not develop as planned. Delegates to the 2002 convention learned that a national conference executive director had not been hired and that the funding strategy had not worked as hoped. Consequently, ministries were downsized, including Mission USA.

Governance and Vision

Most families go through some tough times financially, and this was one of those times for U.S. Mennonite Brethren. As USMB leaders considered the impact of dissolving the General Conference and explored denominational giving patterns and shifts in the way Mennonite Brethren volunteer their time, they began to look at a new form of governance.

Instead of continuing with a multiple-board model, the Board of Church Ministries recommended forming one “super” board and using a model that would be staff driven. The nine-member Leadership Board would represent a balance among the five districts and would manage the functions of the Boards of Trustees, Faith and Life and Communication as well as Mission USA. An annual Institutional Board Summit would bring together the Leadership Board executive committee and representatives from the district conferences, MB Foundation, the two colleges and seminary and MBMS International, now Multiply, for support and to identify agenda for USMB. Project teams would be appointed as needed.

This model was approved in 2004, and Chuck Buller was hired as the first fulltime USMB executive director. Don Morris joined the USMB staff as the Mission USA director. While a single board continues to lead USMB, adjustments to the single board governing model have

been ongoing. For example, it quickly became clear that the Leadership Board was not able to adequately address theological matters, so in 2006 the national Board of Faith and Life was reinstated.

A significant renovation was prompted by the search for a new USMB executive director in 2014. Ed Boschman, who had served in this role since 2007, had announced his intention to retire, and the Leadership Board felt this was an appropriate occasion to review not only the USMB structure but also its vision and goals. The two-year ministry and structure review was led by consultant George Bullard and involved 40-some USMB individuals who set a general direction for the future. Their conclusions were developed by a writing team whose work was then refined by a strategy team. Along the way, Leadership Board and National Summit participants reviewed the various documents and gave their input.

The summary document identified three core commitments: local, national and global church multiplication/church planting/evangelism; intentional disciple-making and leadership development. All USMB activities would be measured in terms of helping local churches reach their full ministry potential. The vision statement envisioned networks of MB churches formed around one or more of the core commitments. The 10-year vision statement, called “The Future Story,” was written from the perspective of someone in 2025 looking

back and describing how USMB ministries had changed and developed during the preceding decade.

Other elements of this new vision included retiring the Institutional Board Summit, forming a National Strategy Team to focus on strategic leadership issues and giving the USMB lead staff member the title of national director. Because this new strategy did not alter USMB bylaws, delegates to the 2014 convention were not asked to vote on the proposed strategy. But they did affirm this vision and strategy to guide USMB until 2025.

Core Commitments

The USMB vision is to empower each local Mennonite Brethren church to reach its full, God-given ministry potential within the framework of our evangelical and Anabaptist distinctives. To achieve this goal, USMB adopted a strategy of building a strong national presence to encourage, support and help resource local churches and districts for mission and ministry, focusing on organic networking of churches and leaders and zeroing in on three core commitments. These three core commitments are:

- Church multiplication and evangelism,
- Intentional disciple-making and
- Leadership development.

These three core commitments are central to the vision of what will characterize U.S. Mennonite Brethren

churches in 2025. While these core commitments are not new, there is a renewed energy and enthusiasm among national staff members and Mennonite Brethren ministries to encourage and equip congregations.

Church multiplication and evangelism are essential to the mission and ministry of U.S. Mennonite Brethren. Under the direction of Ed Boschman (1996-2001) and then Don Morris (2004-2016), Mission USA served as the USMB church planting and church renewal ministry for 20 years. During this time, Mission USA drew on resources provided by a variety of church planting agencies, including C2C Network, the Canadian Conference church planting ministry.

As the USMB Leadership Board discussed how best to carry out its renewed focus on church multiplication and evangelism, in 2015 USMB leaders asked if C2C could serve as the USMB church planting arm. This request prompted C2C to explore expanding its ministry beyond Canada and dovetailed with a growing vision among MB Mission leaders that mission would be defined as local, national and global and would be central to the vision, strategy and structure of every local church and district and national conference.

So, in 2016, Mission USA was retired, and U.S. church planting was done in connection with C2C. Plans for the merger of MB Mission and C2C Network moved forward, and in January 2019, Multiply was launched as a Mennonite Brethren-based mission agency that serves

cross denominationally to facilitate church planting locally, nationally and globally.

The relationship between USMB and C2C/Multiply lasted just three years and in October 2019, Multiply ceased church planting operations in the U.S. The national and district conferences stepped in to support fledgling church plants, but the sudden loss of leadership needed to be addressed.

That void was filled by USMB's Church Planting Council, which will be directed by the church planting mobilizer. The church planting mobilizer will collaborate with district church planting committees and networks with USMB churches to develop church plant projects. The mobilizer will also oversees the Church Planting Council, comprised of representatives from each of the five USMB districts.

The Church Planting Council keeps current of all church planting happenings within districts and nationally, supports and encourages networks of pastors and churches for planting new churches and campuses and can assist with church renewal projects. In addition, The Network, formed by a group of Mennonite Brethren pastors, will provide project management and church planter support.

Leadership Education And Development (LEAD) Initiatives offer local church pastors and leaders resources designed to address the core commitments of intentional disciple-making and leadership development. Disciples and leaders don't just happen. Regardless of our spiritual

“age,” all Christians need to be nourished and equipped to put our gifts and talents to use in God’s kingdom.

LEAD Initiatives provide a foundation for pastors and leaders to enhance their ministry and connect with others while also growing their own faith. The LEAD program includes, but is not limited to:

LEAD Coaching, life-on-life coaching provided to pastors and leaders by a network of certified coaches for personal growth and life enhancement;

LEAD Cohorts, online meeting places for small groups of individuals interested in learning more about a specific topic that are free to all participants; and

LEAD Pods, the official USMB podcast devoted to spiritual growth and leadership development.

USMB Ministry Model

Because the USMB governance model is staff driven, national ministries rely on a team of full- and part-time staff that report to the national director who in turn is responsible to the Leadership Board. In addition to the national director, current staff include a fulltime administrative secretary/bookkeeper and church planting mobilizer. Part-time staff include an administrative assistant, *Christian Leader* editor, *Christian Leader* associate editor, webmaster, social media coordinator and national leadership mobilizers.

The Leadership Board is comprised of nine members elected by delegates to the biennial national conventions, known as USMB Gathering. There are also nine ex-officio members of the Leadership Board: district ministers from the five USMB district conferences, lead staff members of MB Foundation and Multiply and a representative from USMB Youth and the Pacific District Conference Hispanic Council.

The National Strategy Team (NST) is formed to advise the Leadership Board on strategic leadership issues and to encourage collaboration to fulfilling the goals outlined in the Future Story vision. While the district ministers, national director and lead staff members from MB Foundation and Multiply form the NST, the team regularly invites other leaders to educate and advise them on specific issues. For example, after meeting with leaders of congregations comprised of immigrants from DR Congo and Ethiopia, in 2019 the NST hosted two summits and formed a task force to strategize how to effectively serve and integrate the Congolese and Ethiopian congregations that want to become part of USMB.

The USMB Board of Faith and Life (BFL) includes four members at large and the five district ministers and national director as ex-officio members. This board provides doctrinal oversight and is responsible for covenants and policies. Included in its duties, BFL publishes a pamphlet series addressing issues of

significance to the 21st century church, hosts the biennial National Pastors' Orientation and convenes study conferences as needed. Since 2006, BFL has hosted two study conferences.

The first study conference, in 2013, focused on Articles 12 (Society and State) and 13 (Love and Nonresistance) of the Confession of Faith and was convened to aid the process of revising Article 13. The subject of the 2019 was "The Bible and Women in Pastoral Ministry." This study conference was intended to resume the conversation around women in pastoral ministry after a 20-year hiatus.

Equipping the Next Generation

U.S. Mennonite Brethren have prioritized evangelizing and discipling young people. In local congregations, Sunday school, midweek programs, youth groups and vacation Bible school and summer camps invite youth to follow Christ and live as his disciples. USMB district conferences host summer camps and fall and winter conventions and sponsor internships.

For a time, a U.S. Conference board coordinated national youth ministry efforts. But even when that board was eliminated and its responsibilities were assumed by other boards, a commitment to USMB youth remained. In 1975, the first National Youth Conference (NYC) was held in New Mexico at the Glorieta Baptist Conference Center. A total of 1,395 youth, sponsors and event staff attended.

The every-four-year event, held in a mountain setting at a full-service conference setting, grew in attendance—a high of 1,796 in 1999—and scope, including multiple keynote speakers and concerts as well as a talent show and seniors’ breakfast hosted by Tabor College and Fresno Pacific University.

In 2003, a service component was added as an afternoon free-time option. Students were bused from the YMCA of the Rockies conference center in Estes Park, Colorado, to Boulder and were challenged to carry out “random acts of senseless kindness.” Offering a national event with a strong service component was a priority of the NYC 2007 planning team. So, they shifted the venue to a hotel in Anaheim, California. The large urban setting provided enough faith-based ministries that each NYC attendee could serve in some way. San Antonio 2011 and Named 2015 in Denver, Colorado, continued to provide students with the opportunity to serve as well as worship in general sessions, be challenged in workshops and connect with other USMB youth.

In 2019, NYC returned to New Mexico and Glorieta Adventure Camps for YouthCon 2019. The 2019 planning team had determined that one of the weaknesses of the hotel setting was the lack of space for natural community. The team wanted youth to have meals together and plenty of places to gather informally, and the camp setting allowed for that. Participants were encouraged to download the USMBYouth app to their phones. Rather

than one or two speakers, the organizers chose a team of speakers, and their messages progressed from an invitation to be part of God's story to saying yes to Jesus' call to follow and serve him.

YouthCon 2019 was planned by members of the USMB National Youth Commission, known as USMB Youth, who recruited volunteers with expertise in specific areas needed to pull off a national event. USMB Youth had launched a new vision following NYC 2015 that focused on supporting youth workers via The Network, providing a national gathering for high school students and continuing an emphasis on service through Project:Serve which would help fund projects created by youth groups to serve their community.

Following YouthCon 2019, USMB Youth re-evaluated its vision and strategy and adjusted. They continue to connect and resource youth workers via The Network. A variety of factors led USMB Youth to move away from a national youth event held every four years during the school year in favor of an annual summer camp called Ascent. The first national summer camp was held at Glorieta Adventure Camps in June 2021. Restrictions and protocols in place due to the COVID-19 global pandemic impacted camp attendance and available activities, but USMB Youth anticipate the camp will increase in terms of campers and activities.

The third USMB focus shifted from promoting service to calling out and training new leaders through

The Leadership Pipeline. A team of part-time leadership mobilizers began working in 2022 to identify and train young people for ministry. Their efforts will be supported by a Leadership Pipeline website where local churches can post openings for internships and interns can post profiles. Additional information about USMB Youth is available on the USMB website.

Other leadership training and ministry opportunities available to USMB youth include Faith Front, a Tabor College program designed to encourage Christian youth to develop competencies for ministry leadership with special emphasis on pastoral ministry and other church vocations.

The Pacific District Conference Next Generation Leadership Board offers internship opportunities for young adults, while Multiply offers young adults several short-term, cross-cultural ministry options. Through its Leadership Generation Fund, MB Foundation offers scholarships to high school through graduate students interested in serving the Mennonite Brethren family locally or globally.

Christian Leader

Did you know that when the *Christian Leader* was first published in 1937, it was a youth publication designed to serve a constituency that was fast switching from German to English?

Mennonite Brethren have actively communicated the good news through various media, especially print. Christian literature distributions in the Russian colonies were one catalyst for the renewal that produced the Mennonite Brethren church.

A decade after Mennonite Brethren left Russia and arrived in the U.S., leaders wanted a periodical to communicate with their scattered churches. In 1884 they began publishing *Zionsbote* (Messenger of Zion). This German-language publication was the official periodical of North American Mennonite Brethren until 1951. That year *Christian Leader* became the official publication of the North American Mennonite Brethren, and it served both U.S. and Canadian Mennonite Brethren until 1955 when the Canadian Conference developed its own publication, *MB Herald*. The *MB Herald* became an online-only publication in 2019, making *Christian Leader* the only print periodical serving Mennonite Brethren in North America.

Since 1955, *Christian Leader* has focused its content on the issues and activities of U.S. Mennonite Brethren. In 2010, the magazine underwent a thorough redesign which included an intentional focus on the USMB mission and vision. Subsequent redesigns have emphasized USMB's commitment to church planting and evangelism, discipleship and leadership development.

In 2021, a comprehensive review recommended that *Christian Leader* continue to be offered both in print

and online. The USMB Leadership Board affirmed the recommendation that an Editorial Committee be formed to assist the editors in selecting topics and identifying writers for theological content and that a Review Committee look over this content.

A free subscription to *Christian Leader* is available to all members and attendees of USMB churches. Most of the magazine content is available online. C-Link, a free e-news digest, is published biweekly.

District Conferences

USMB is comprised of five district conferences organized along geographic lines. Each district is responsible for pastoral oversight, local faith and life issues and church planting.

The **Central District Conference** (CDC) covers a large territory: Iowa, Indiana, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, Minnesota and Wisconsin. The CDC's 39 churches are located in rural, inner city and suburban communities. In addition to English-speaking congregations, CDC congregations include Hispanic, Ethiopian, Lakota, Congolese and Slavic congregations. The district hosts an annual pastors' retreat, youth conference and adult conference and employs one full-time and an additional part-time district minister.

In 2019 the North Carolina District Conference was renamed the **Eastern District Conference** (EDC) in

recognition of potential growth. In 2020, the district began the process of welcoming Congolese churches in Georgia, Kentucky, Maine, Ohio, Tennessee and Virginia.

More than 100 years ago, Mennonite Brethren missionaries came to work with the African American community in Elk Park, North Carolina. The EDC is a result of the perseverance of these men and women who overcame great odds and developed multi-racial congregations. Today these churches are a unique blend of cultures that are growing in fresh new ways. In 2013 a Hispanic congregation in Lenoir, North Carolina, joined the EDC.

The EDC has a Board of Faith and Life and Christian Education Board that provides theological training through The Urban Ministry Institute. The district of nine congregations is served by a district minister.

The **Latin America District Conference** (LAMB) is a predominantly Hispanic group born from mission work initiated by the Southern District Conference in the Rio Grande Valley. While LAMB congregations typically hold services in Spanish, congregations are adding English services to reach younger people. The 11 LAMB congregations meet annually for worship and fellowship and are served by a district minister.

Comprised of 122 congregations in Arizona, California, Nevada, Oregon, Utah and Washington, the **Pacific District Conference** (PDC) is the largest regional conference in terms of member churches. A full-time

district minister works with the PDC Board of Faith and Life, Home Missions Board, Next Generation Leadership Board and Hispanic Council to accomplish more together than they could individually as they seek to fulfill Jesus' command to go and make disciples.

The 41 churches of the **Southern District Conference** (SDC) are located in Arkansas, Colorado, Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma. The district employs a full-time district minister and youth minister. Four commissions—Youth, Stewardship, Faith and Life and Church Extension and Evangelism—and an Executive Council guide the district's goals of igniting church planting partnerships, mobilizing world engaging generations and cultivating vital congregations. The SDC has a strong summer camping program for elementary, junior high and high school students and holds an annual convention for junior and senior high youth.

CHAPTER 10

The International Mennonite Brethren Family

Have you been part of a successful family gathering? Relatives come together from far and wide to catch up on old friendships and expand connections to new family members. Christian clans tell stories, do activities, sing and pray. Sometimes we're not sure we want to go, but at the end, everyone is happy they put in the effort.

The International Community of Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB) is a family that continues to grow. In our case, it's because we are a church on God's mission. New members are born because someone reached out to a region where the gospel of Jesus is not known. After some time, a cluster of local churches registers as a new Mennonite Brethren body.

In 2017, an exciting ICOMB family gathering occurred in Thailand, bringing together some 240 delegates from 36 countries. Normally, ICOMB summits occur annually when leaders of the 22-member national churches gather for sharing, equipping and spiritual

encouragement. This time, ICOMB invited leaders of another 15 emerging national church bodies in partnership with Multiply. Thailand 2017 was the fifth ICOMB-sponsored consultation (the others were the general global consultation in 1999 in Wichita, Kansas; higher education consultations in 2007 in Fresno, California, and in 2011 in Winnipeg, Manitoba; and a Congo-based education consultation in 2009), but it was the first global mission-focused consultation since 1988, when Curitiba '88, sponsored by Multiply, gave birth to ICOMB.

The purpose of ICOMB is to facilitate the relationships and ministries of its member national churches (conferences) for greater fruit in discipleship and witness. One could say that ICOMB is the international Mennonite Brethren conference, bringing together all the established national Mennonite Brethren churches, including the U.S. Conference of MB Churches (USMB). ICOMB equips and inspires national leaders through community, events and resourcing through long-distance coaching, continental cohort meetings, etc.

ICOMB is supported by all national churches. It doesn't have a big budget, nor many programs. Rather, its power lies in relationships and global identity.

In 2004, after a three-year process guided by an international team, the International Confession of Faith was accepted as the guiding Confession for all members. It is compatible with the USMB Confession and all existing

Mennonite Brethren Confessions. In an “east-meets-west” style, it combines narrative and point form.

It answers the question, “How does God work in the world?” by summarizing the biblical story from Genesis to Revelation. It then answers the question, “How do Mennonite Brethren respond?” in five easy-to-remember points: We are People of the Bible; People of a New Way of Life; People of the Covenant Community; People of Reconciliation; and People of Hope.

In 2008, a lesson book, written by leaders from every continent, was published to enhance engagement with the confession. By 2017, the confession and the lesson book had been translated into 15 languages. Every new member (i.e., national church) must adhere to the International Confession of Faith. They may accept it as is or use it as a template to write some of their own confessional emphases.

Education is important to ICOMB. It operates the Global Scholarship Fund, giving grants toward study expenses of national leaders who will leverage advanced education for leadership training within their own national church. ICOMB also facilitated the development of a curriculum based on Anabaptist values for more than 300 Mennonite schools (Grades 1-12) in DR Congo. The curriculum was designed and written by Congolese, with funding from ICOMB, to revitalize the Mennonite-run school system there, serving nearly 75,000 students.

In summary, ICOMB is your international family. If you are reading this, you are likely exploring the Mennonite Brethren family, serving as a Mennonite Brethren pastor or considering baptism and membership. You are not alone! You are part of a local church that provides discipleship and nurture in your faith. Moreover, your local church is part of a district church, which is part of the USMB national church. And USMB is part of ICOMB.

You have Mennonite Brethren sisters and brothers in every part of the world. Some of them live in poverty. Some are neglected by corrupt or despotic governments. Some undergo active persecution. Some live where resources are plentiful.

Our first identity is in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Second, we are Mennonite Brethren in confessional identity. We believe the Bible is the Word of God. We believe that we must confess and believe on Jesus Christ for salvation. We believe in renewal. We believe in the church, which is Christ's body in the world. We believe in reconciliation—a holistic gospel for the whole person, bringing peace with God and peace among humankind. We believe that the kingdom is here—and not yet; that Christ's coming will resolve everything in God's timing and purposes. And third, we are a church on mission. We share the good news of the gospel of Jesus locally, nationally and globally.

During the global COVID-19 pandemic, family members have been impacted in slightly different ways because of where they live. And families have learned to appreciate the ways in which technology kept them connected with one another. The same is true for the global Mennonite Brethren family. In 2020 and 2021, the annual ICOMB summits were held online. A total of 80 people participated in two global and four regional meetings in 2020. In Japan it was 10:00 p.m. and in Vancouver it was 6:00 a.m., but delegates were still able to share with and pray for one another and to have communion even though some representatives were 11,500 miles apart.

What follows is a brief description of the global Mennonite Brethren family, both current members of ICOMB and potential future members.

Africa: Angola, DR Congo, Malawi and beyond

Igreja Evangélica dos Irmãos Menonitas em **Angola** (IEIMA, Evangelical Churches of Mennonite Brethren in Angola), began in the early 1980s when a missionary to Congo commissioned leaders to return to Angola to evangelize and plant churches. These Angolans had fled the 30-year civil war (1975-2005) and connected with the Mennonite Brethren church in Congo.

The unfortunate legacy of a church born during such violent times was deep mistrust and internal

conflict. Leaders found it hard to resolve major and minor differences. Moreover, the devastation of the war impoverished most of the population. They are still recovering. Nevertheless, a Bible school trains pastors in a decentralized model, reaching from the capital city of Luanda out to the majority membership located near the Congo border.

This church of 8,000 members in 75 congregations never had a foreign missionary presence to guide them. ICOMB supports IEIMA through coaching, visits and observing their general assemblies when they elect new leaders.

In 2020, 17 local churches were closed by the government because of a lack of infrastructure, specifically church buildings. Church leaders are raising funds to reopen the churches and to build relationships among local pastors.

Because of COVID-19, church members are not able to travel, and the economic situation has led to a significant lack of food. The conference is encouraging members to grow vegetables to have something to eat and are emphasizing hygiene and handwashing. Members are meeting in their homes for prayer meetings, are engaged in personal Bible study and are evangelizing their neighbors.

Communauté des Églises des Frères Mennonites au **Congo** (CEFMC, Community of MB Churches of Congo) numbers about 100,000 members in some 500 congregations. This church is around 100 years old.

Mennonite Brethren workers went to Congo under the Mennonite mission board in 1913. In 1922, the MB Mission board finally agreed we should engage in Congo, and the first Mennonite Brethren congregation was planted then. Within 20 years, some 200 schools were operating, and the church grew primarily in the rural areas. The cities were not regarded as fertile for the gospel.

In 1960, independence dramatically pushed all missionaries out; the Congolese took over church leadership, ready or not. There were major gaps in ability because of a lack of training. As missionaries gradually returned, they located in the cities, for security. Since then, the church has thrived in both rural and urban regions, particularly in Kinshasa, the capital, with around 50 Mennonite Brethren congregations.

Education still is a major feature of CEFMC. The churches of Congo were mandated to run the schools. Local Mennonite Brethren churches and groups operate about 125 schools for grades 1-12, serving 35,000 students. Four Bible schools, located in various rural communities, train lay and pastoral leaders. Two college-level schools operate in Kinshasa, offering pastoral and medical training.

CEFMC currently reaches out to the oppressed Batwa (pygmy) people deep in the forests. The Congolese MB church has a vision to reach the nine countries bordering DR Congo. A network of half a dozen churches is found in the challenging region of Eastern Congo. CEFMC

operates with very little foreign assistance, even though its earnings per capita locate DR Congo among the 10 poorest nations on earth. They employ Asset-Based Community Development, working with resources already in hand.

The church in Congo and Angola—indeed in most African regions—is alive with loud, exuberant worship and fervent prayer. Local congregations disciple youth and adults through choirs, which typically sing Scripture texts and stories. These choirs also are an effective outreach tool.

The Mennonite Brethren Church in **Malawi** (MBCM) was welcomed as a full member of ICOMB in 2020 during ICOMB’s first ever online summit. Dozens of Mennonite Brethren leaders from around the world offered words of welcome, prayers and blessings in a joyful celebration.

The story of MBCM begins with a young man, Bahati (Safari) Mutabesha, fleeing for his life after seeing his family killed in eastern DR Congo due to ethnic conflict. Safari ended up in the Dzaleka Refugee Camp, near Dowa, Malawi. However, here, too, he finds ethnic conflict and a near hopeless situation. He remembered his discipling in an MB church and his gifting as an evangelist. So, he began sharing the Gospel of Peace and pointed conflicted refugees to the Prince of Peace. And in 2009, a church was planted in the refugee camp.

With God’s blessing on them, Safari and fellow workers began planting churches outside the refugee camp among

nearby Malawian towns and villages. In 2015, in search of partnerships for their growing movement, the MBCM contacted MB Mission (now Multiply) through their website. This partnership grew rapidly and has resulted in further growth in training, community development and church planting. In 2020, MBCM counted 37 churches and 14,000 members.

Elsewhere in Africa are other emerging networks and we pray these will become new national or regional churches. In Burkina Faso, Evangelical Mennonite Conference (EMC) workers began a Bible translation project with Nanerige people. Multiply workers have continued the work. An emerging church connects to both the Mennonite Brethren and EMC international church communities.

In Burundi, an emerging group has embraced the ICOMB Confession of Faith and is seeking membership.

In Namibia, one church with various satellites has grown out of the witness of Multiply's short-term Disciple Making International (DMI) teams.

An emerging conference of more than 30 churches in Uganda is interested in linking with ICOMB.

In North Africa, significant numbers of underground groups are coming to Christ amid suspicion and opposition from radical Muslims. Small groups are found in Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Yemen—the latter colloquially call themselves “Yemennonites.”

Asia: India, Japan, Khmu Mission and beyond

The Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches in **India** is one of our oldest national churches and the largest. The first MB missionaries went from Russia (now Ukraine) to Hyderabad and organized the first church in Nalgonda. Today India's Mennonite Brethren church numbers around 200,000 members in some 1,000 congregations.

Originally, the church was established in India through mission "stations" or compounds. The Mennonite Brethren bought several large properties in the region east of Hyderabad in cooperation with the Baptist missions. But during that period, comity held sway. This was William Carey's idea of working in discrete fields to avoid direct "competition for souls."

Therefore, the Mennonite Brethren and the Baptists arranged a "swap": the Mennonite Brethren ceded the new stations to the Baptists and received several stations south of Hyderabad. And so today, the India MB church is found in Hyderabad and rural districts to the south. One can still visit the original sites which have been turned into large schools and in two cases, Baptist congregations of several thousand members.

The station compounds included churches, hospitals, schools, farming operations and missionary residences. They focused on reaching poverty-stricken "untouchables" (Dalits). By 1970, changing mission policy and rising

nationalism combined to allow the India Mennonite Brethren church to emerge into autonomous self-governance.

Today, the church is organized into congregation-centered ministry units. Larger local churches sponsor outreach teams, creating a multiplying effect. Church extension workers and pastors are trained through MB Centenary Bible College in Shamshabad, a bustling village near Hyderabad. The college teaches in English on campus and in Telugu in extension course programs in various centers closer to the pastoral workers.

Despite the sorrows brought by COVID-19, recent celebrations included a successful dedication of the Chennipadu church building. The three-day celebration included large group meals, tents erected around the village and gifts of blessing from surrounding churches.

The Mennonite Brethren church in **Japan** was born in 1950 because of the ministry of missionaries sent by Mennonite Brethren churches in North America. Centered in the metropolis of Osaka, the Japanese MB church is well organized, operating its own seminary, youth and camping programs and supporting full-time pastors in most of the 29 congregations.

After celebrating its 65th anniversary in 2015, the Japanese Board of Faith and Life embarked on contextualizing the ICOMB International Confession of Faith in light of the government's push to create a standing army. This is a constitutional change and

controversial for many in Japan. This push is challenging the church to “self-theologize” on the question of peace in their context.

Other major challenges are found in the aging of both country and church, coupled with a strong post-modern, post-Buddhist shift in the culture. These are calling the church to rethink its approach to witness and discipleship.

In 2020, the Japanese MB Conference dedicated the MB Mission Center, a new conference center and seminary. Later that year, all church activities were severely restricted due to COVID-19, especially impacting evangelistic activities. But churches continued to minister online and were able to connect with Christians around the world. The pandemic also forced the Japan MB Conference to move their 70th anniversary celebration online.

Accepted in 2012, the Mennonite Brethren church in **Laos**, Khmu Mission, is one of the newer members of ICOMB. In the early 1990s, pastors in the country contacted Phone Keo Keovilay, a Khmu Christian from Laos, living in California, who had earned a U.S. passport due to his contributions during the Vietnam War. Keovilay periodically returned to Laos to support these pastors during his studies at MB Biblical Seminary, now Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary. Eventually he and his wife moved into northern Thailand (rather than Laos, for security reasons) and established a training center on the

Mekong River, accessible to leaders in the growing church on the Laos side of the river.

Today, there are 350 Khmu Mission church fellowships, approximately half with “built churches” and the rest meeting in homes. There are many more “preaching point” villages reached by the evangelistic efforts of pastors and others. While it is illegal to proselytize, Christianity is recognized, and people are permitted to share the faith with relatives. Khmu believers comb their family trees for opportunities to share the gospel—redefining the “Mennonite game” of discovering one’s relatives.

The animistic worldview is still prevalent. Therefore, baptism candidates are asked (by local leaders, not expatriate missionaries) to remove bracelets or other amulets as an expression of faith and total commitment. Villagers may be hostile to a church because they may interpret bad experiences to be the fault of Christians who no longer make merit or provide daily offerings to the powers that be.

Although the conference is called “Khmu Mission,” its membership reaches beyond the Khmu. Perhaps one-fifth of the members are Hmong and another small percentage are from various tribal origins. While Multiply continues to provide support through workers and finance, Khmu Mission has good structures, capable leaders over regionally organized groups of churches and a strong mission vision to reach Khmu and related groups in

South East Asia (such as Myanmar, China, Vietnam and Cambodia).

Asia will, like Africa, be an area of interest and growth for Mennonite Brethren. Our family is developing groups of churches in various countries.

Outreach to Myanmar (Burma) comes from three sources. The India Mennonite Brethren church supports a worker who trained at their college. Khmu Mission has developed congregations through its expanding network. And finally, a Burmese migrant worker-cum-pastor is leading, together with Canadian missionaries, an expanding group of churches that he has planted near Bangkok, Thailand, as well as within his home country.

Kapatirang Menonite Ng Pilipinas Incorporated (Mennonite Brethren of the Philippines) is an emerging conference composed of eight local churches in different regions of the country, with a total of about 670 members. In-person home Bible studies, visitations, campus outreaches and other ministries were put on hold because of COVID-19. Despite limited technology, the conference quickly pivoted to online services and used Facebook and YouTube to connect with their congregations with services, prayer meetings and chat groups.

In September 2021, the group celebrated the baptism of 17 individuals. Some of these new believers were introduced to the gospel by Multiply TREK teams. The churches have a ministry on the Palawan State University campus and anticipate renovating their center, Brooke's

Point, once classes resume. The center was the site of two leadership training modules attended by a total of 90 pastors, church leaders and youth leaders.

China was once our largest mission field. More North American Mennonite Brethren missionaries spent time there than in any other location. The Cultural Revolution removed all these missionaries and forced the church to go underground. Today, a tiny handful of very old Christians still remember some missionaries. More important is the growth of a church faithfully serving God in a hostile environment. Also, there is an emerging new work among migrant workers. Multiply workers are facilitating and supporting Chinese leaders who are planting churches.

In the past, we have had close relations in Indonesia with the Mennonites of the Muria Synod through pastoral development. In the 1970s, MB Biblical Seminary (now Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary) graduate Adi Sutanto founded the Sangkakala Foundation, which spawned the Jemaat Kristen Indonesia. JKI is a renewal-oriented family of churches of more than 45,000 members in a variety of countries, including the U.S., Australia and the Netherlands. The largest Mennonite church in the world is the JKI church, in Semarang, Indonesia, with some 20,000 members (Lapp, 104-116).

Europe: Austria, Germany, Lithuania, Portugal

and beyond

After four centuries, Mennonites from North America—spiritual heirs of 16th century Anabaptists—returned to Europe on a mission. They came to Germany, Austria and other Western European nations as agents of reconciliation and ministers of relief with Mennonite Central Committee after World War 2. This opened the door for evangelism and church planting by Mennonite Brethren.

The Mennonite Brethren national church in **Austria** is known as Mennonitischer Freikirche Oesterreich (Mennonite Free Church of Austria). Church planting began near Linz, the capital of Upper Austria, where some 30,000 refugees dwelt in 20 camps after the war. Austria was the site of aggressive Counter-Reformation efforts in the 1500s. Until the 21st century, the magisterial church resisted the development of free churches. Slow faithful growth has resulted in a conference of five congregations and more than 400 members, with heartfelt spirituality and longing to reach a post-churched, materialistic society.

Germany has three conferences—AMBD, VMBB and BTG.

In Neuwied am Rhein, refugees from Poland and the Soviet Union who had been Mennonite Brethren members united to form the first Mennonite Brethren congregation in Western Europe. This was the beginning of the AMBD conference (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Mennonitischer Brüdergemeinden in Deutschland). Today the Neuwied

church reaches out faithfully to new immigrants coming to Germany from Syria and other Middle Eastern countries. Over time, mission workers from Germany and North America extended the AMBD fellowship, reaching to Berlin and former East Germany's Dresden.

Prior to COVID-19 AMBD's 13 local churches had more than 1500 members. AMBD has grown during the pandemic, reaching 1,700 people by the end of 2021. "We are very grateful that, in addition to the online offerings, most churches still held presence services throughout the pandemic," reported AMBD in the January 2022 ICOMB newsletter. "Churches often enjoy greater freedom than other sectors of society during this time. That is a reason to be very grateful." AMBD hoped to gather in 2022 for its regular Pentecost conference.

Meanwhile, North American missionaries planting churches in Austria had the opportunity to reach out to Bavarian towns. At first this was one network, straddling the border. From 1970 to 1993, eight local churches were founded in Bavaria among Lutherans looking for renewal. The Bavaria group felt distant geographically and culturally from the AMBD group, so the VMBB (Verband Mennonitischer Brüdergemeinden in Bayern) was formed.

Today, only four churches remain. Two closed and two withdrew from the fellowship. Upon reflection, greater care could have been taken to cultivate our confessional identity and to love the primary community which nurtures that identity.

In 1987, a new Soviet law governing exits came into effect, triggering a flood of migrants into Germany. The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1989 simply added to this effect. They are called Aussiedler (resettlers). While AMBD's original members were Aussiedler, the German government officially grouped some half-million Aussiedler under the heading "Other Confessions." Included among them were about 300,000 Baptists and Mennonites, also known as "evangelical free churches." Broadly speaking, they discovered they were not at home among the AMBD or other established Mennonite churches founded through mission efforts. Therefore, they created their own congregations more reflective of their church experience in Russia.

Also reflective of their Soviet experience was the challenge of identity when the government only recognized certain Christian labels. Baptist was recognized; Mennonite was not. Through the decades, many different alignments occurred. Therefore, as church networks and associations were established in Germany, some groups held more Mennonite Brethren individuals than others. The BTG (Bund Taufgesinnter Gemeinden) has the largest percentage of Mennonite Brethren among these associations and is one of the more stable and developed unions of Aussiedler congregations.

Heinrich Klassen, chairman of the BTG, reports that the German Anabaptist Churches started to work together in 1989. BTG started with six churches. Today,

50 churches belong to BTG (with 12,000 members). BTG runs a Bible seminary and four mission agencies. At the start of 2022 they reported nine traveling ministry teams comprised of almost 50 people from various churches and partner ministries. The teams organize seminars, plan for church plants, work on theology, train leaders and offer pastoral care seminars for congregations. The BTG congregations are also engaged in refugee work and translate their worship services into Farsi, Turkish, Arabic, Russian and so on. BTG congregations are responding to recent floods by sending volunteers to meet practical needs and to share the love of Jesus.

The **Lithuania** Free Christian Church (LLKB) joined ICOMB in 2014. In the Gorbachev era, Mennonites from Ukraine and Russia settled in Lithuania to be near Germany. They formed a church known as the Free Christian Church. When the Soviet Union broke up, herculean effort by Lithuanians achieved national independence in 1991. This paved the way for Mennonites interested in education to respond to a call from the new Minister of Education to establish a university. Today, LCC University is a major contributor to the Lithuanian educational scene. LCC President Marlene Wall is a MB educator from the United States.

The establishment of LCC triggered mission efforts from North America and Germany. Today seven local churches with more than 200 members witness to Christ. Local congregations have a variety of local ministries,

including a daycare, and together host summer camps for children and teens. They are also involved in church planting and have sent missionaries to other countries, most recently Brazil.

Portugal is another one of ICOMB's newer members; they joined in 2004. North American missionaries began leading outreach efforts there in the 1980s, later joined by Angolan leaders, resulting in several churches of Portuguese and African members. Joining them in the 1990s, BTG sent missionaries from Germany to work with Russian resettlers in Lisbon.

The conference was legally recognized as a religious entity in 2020. Today there are six congregations with a total membership around 200 in the Igreja dos Irmaos Menonitas de Portugal (IIMP). Since achieving this recognition, IIMP is restructuring with the goal of enriching church relationships and unifying mission, ministries and vision. Leaders are building systems of pastoral care and developing strategies toward building financial health.

The Mennonite Brethren movement has come full circle to its birthplace, Ukraine. Mission effort began in the mid-1990s. Today, there are 25 churches, plus two in Crimea, which became Russian after annexation. Individuals and churches from North America and Europe support programs for orphans and widows, and for an alternative education approach for teenagers and young adults.

These approaches are the backbone of church planting, along with weekly relief trips into the conflict zone of East Ukraine to deliver food and medicine to people who have lost everything due to shelling. Churches have started very near to and inside the conflict zone. The church actively shares the gospel with Ukrainian troops, sometimes only days before they are killed in combat. The Association of the MB Churches of Ukraine (AMBCU) expects to become a member of ICOMB very soon.

An ICOMB conference is also emerging in Kyrgyzstan. After World War 2, Kyrgyzstan became a place of refuge for many forcibly displaced Germans, including German Mennonites. However, missionary outreach among the indigenous population was slow, beginning only 20 years later. By the end of the 1980s, almost all ethnic Germans had emigrated to Germany.

Just a few years later, missionaries like Heinrich and Annie Rempel, originally from nearby Tajikistan, returned to the region to plant churches among the people of Central Asia, among the least reached in the world. The Rempels have worked in the area for 30 years, 14 of them in-country. Their vision is to start new church planting efforts and to help scattered churches work together. Their ministry has recently been enhanced by their relationship with Kyrgyz Evangelical Alliance leaders.

The emerging conference, named Maschayaktyn Jamatty (Disciples of Churches), includes five churches, two church plants and home groups that wish to become

churches. The church in Tokmok, planted by Timurlan and Irina Abdyl daev, is the first-ever MB church in the country. Some of their ministries include pandemic relief, a rehabilitation center, youth work and a ministry to the blind.

In Spain, church planting efforts in the 1980s went very slowly, and MB Mission (now Multiply) pulled out, leaving a single local church that still carries witness to Christ in Barcelona.

And in Turkey, work began through a “chance” encounter between a Mennonite Brethren missionary and a Christian van driver. This has fostered a new initiative in Turkey, sending a significant number of North American and European workers into that country.

Latin America: Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and beyond

The Mennonite Brethren national church in **Brazil** is referred to as COBIM: Convenção Brasileira das Igrejas Evangélicas Irmãos Menonitas (Brazilian Convention of Evangelical MB Churches). COBIM began as Mennonite Brethren migrated from Russia (Ukraine) to settle in virgin subtropical forests in 1930. Many more churches were established as Mennonite migration continued. In fact, similar migration into Paraguay led the Mennonite Brethren in both countries to form the South American MB Conference in 1948, which then in turn requested and

became a district of the General Conference of the MB Church of North America.

In 1960, the Brazil conference assertively engaged in reaching out to and planting churches among Portuguese-speaking Brazilians, ultimately forming a second association. Over time, the functionality of a South American district faded; and, within Brazil, the differences in language and culture between German and Portuguese churches waned. So in 1995, the two entities merged to form COBIM.

The church has consistently offered holistic witness—serving orphans, people in need and individuals caught in the drug culture—by providing quality schools for children and youth, pastoral training, camps and more. Today, COBIM numbers more than 80 congregations and 10,800 members. In the last few years, leaders have committed to prayer, fasting and renewal. Rapid growth and visionary church planting in new regions of the country are the result. COBIM is also sending missionaries to Angola and other Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa.

Colombia was the first South American country to receive a North American missionary—in 1945 among the indigenous Choco. Since then, churches have been established in Cali, Medellin and Bogota. In every area, the violent effects of numerous anti-government forces plus drug cartels have given the church opportunities to bring the gospel of peace. Today, Asociación de Iglesias Hermanos Menonitas de Colombia numbers 44 local

congregations and 2,500 members. It has a high school, non-formal pastor training institutes and a legacy of working closely with Mennonite Central Committee to address many local needs.

In 2020, the conference mission agency, Heme Aqui (Here I Am), was recognized by the government as a legal entity. That year they also hosted an online mission conference for pastors and mission leaders. A pre-conference online study was held in October followed by a three-day conference using YouTube and small group Zoom calls. Leaders from Colombia as well as Uruguay, Paraguay, Brazil, Panama, Mexico and Peru attended.

“The congress is a first step in a strategy to mobilize the church toward fulfilling our mission,” says Jose Manual Prada Bernal. “With gratitude we can see ourselves in Latin America united in one desire: to understand and carry out the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In **Mexico**, mission work begun in the 1950s has produced Iglesia Cristiana de Paz en México, (Christian Peace Church in Mexico). As of 2018, ICPM is a family of 346 members in seven local congregations located in three cities. In 2019 they reported baptizing 31 individuals.

Pastor Carlos Ortega, of Villa de Alvarez in Colima, works with juvenile offenders, including young people working for drug traffickers as hired killers. “Most are orphans who are recruited by the cartels at an early age (12 and older) to fill the void of not having a family,” he says. Ortega ministers through soccer and personal or

group discipleship. Working with these young people is difficult, says Ortega since he and others volunteers do not see much outward change.

The Matthew Training Center, operated by Multiply, serves young adults in discipleship and mission preparation through a non-formal program. Students also come from other Mennonite Brethren national churches in South America.

Panama's Iglesia Evangélica Unida—Hermanos Menonitas (United Evangelical Church – MB) is unique: all its 600 members (in 13 local churches) are indigenous, coming from either the Wounaán or Emberá tribes. Literacy work began in the mid-1950s by visiting linguists. MB Mission (now Multiply) involvement centered on helping the indigenous people retain and enhance their culture and identity. Every attempt was made to limit paternalism—the missionaries' approach was ahead of its time. From the beginning, they assumed the locals were best equipped to work among their own people, so missionaries came and went, focusing on coaching and consulting. Many members are artisans weaving museum-quality baskets and carving rosewood and tagua nuts for tourist trade and income for the church.

In **Paraguay**, Mennonite refugees from Russia during the 1930s and 1940s joined earlier Mennonite immigrants from Canada to establish five German-speaking colonies. The Paraguayan MB church has been active in evangelism among indigenous tribes and in the capital city of

Asunción. The result has been the formation of two MB groups—one using German and the other Spanish.

The German Vereinigung der Mennoniten Brüder Gemeinden Paraguays (Association of Paraguayan MB Churches) has invested in primary and secondary schools and in higher education. Instituto Biblico Asunción is becoming a training center for Mennonite Brethren throughout South America. The five secondary schools are also church planting sites, since they reach out to non-Christian students and their parents. Media ministries in television and radio are also a major investment.

Perhaps the most unique investment of resources is La Libertad, a church within the walls of a maximum-security prison in Asuncion. The “outside church” has renovated cell blocks, devised an admittance protocol for about 500 inmates and set up a fully functioning “inside church” with leadership (all inmates), discipleship, worship, baptism and membership.

The Spanish Convención Hermanos Mennonitas die Paraguay (Mennonite Brethren Convention of Paraguay) celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2021. The conference has more than 60 churches and 3,766 members and reported total church attendance of 7,500 before the pandemic. Leaders have an assertive church planting vision and have set a goal of planting 50 new churches in response to God’s faithfulness during the past 50 years. At the time of their anniversary celebration, there were already 14 missionary points about to become churches,

with people being baptized and involved in ministry. The conference also hopes to establish a Bible institute to train pastors.

The Spanish language is predominant among the congregants of the two Paraguayan national churches. So, they work closely together to faithfully witness to Christ in Paraguay, though there is no plan to merge like the churches in Brazil.

Conferencia Peruana Hermanos Menonitas, the MB church in **Peru**, began among Ashaninca Indians with Krimmer Mennonite Brethren workers in 1950. The Mennonite Brethren merged with KMB in 1960 and assumed responsibility. Because of Shining Path, a violent guerrilla group, foreign workers left in the 1990s, and the church assumed an independent identity.

In late 1982, 2,500 mm of rain fell in five to six months, flooding the northern Peru coastal cities of Piura and Sullana. MB Mission (now Multiply) responded with emergency relief and subsequent to that, with a steady stream of mission workers to plant churches, including a missionary couple from Colombia. While the MB church admits to too much dependency on foreign support, it is gradually taking on complete responsibility.

Periodic El Nino situations continue to cause much damage to churches and members' homes, so that foreign aid is needed for recovery. The ICOMB family in various parts of the world participates in love through prayer and donations when this happens.

In 2020, the Trujillo congregation initiated a practical leadership apprenticeship program called Train & Multiply. This new model includes beginning new house churches.

The **Uruguay** MB church was founded by 18 Mennonite Brethren members aboard the Dutch ship Volendam on the Atlantic Ocean, October 22, 1948. They were part of a small wave of Mennonite refugees who settled in Uruguay. During the ensuing years, efforts to evangelize local Spanish people succeeded in establishing more churches. In 1979, the German conference officially ceased to exist and the Spanish conference (Consejo de las Congregaciones de los Hermanos Menonitas en Uruguay) took over. Today there are seven churches with around 200 members.

Mennonite Brethren have congregations in two other South American countries. Venezuela has two Mennonite Brethren churches, planted in 1991 by Chinese Mennonite Brethren churches in British Columbia. They sent missionaries to Venezuela to establish a witness among Chinese immigrants. While the Venezuela churches have experienced limited growth, they are part of the family, as is the single Mennonite Brethren congregation in Argentina, planted by Paraguayan Mennonite Brethren mission efforts.

North America: Canada and the United States

Mennonite Brethren in North America conducted their first convention as the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church in 1879. In 1909, Mennonite Brethren were subdivided into four district conferences: Northern (Canada) and Southern, Central and Pacific (U.S.) Congregations in these regions worked together to support foreign missions, a seminary, college and Bible schools, evangelism, Christian education and publication. (See chapter 8).

In 1945, the Northern District, which had reached about the size of the other three combined because of Mennonite immigration to Canada, incorporated itself into what is now the Canadian Conference of MB Churches (CCMBC). In 1959, the districts in the U.S. voted to organize the U.S. Conference of MB Churches (USMB).

This new structure made church growth and evangelism, youth work, Christian education concerns, stewardship and Bible and liberal arts colleges the responsibility of the national conferences. Foreign missions, faith and life matters, seminary training and resource publication became, for the most part, binational concerns, and boards to guide these ministries were formed with representatives from both Canada and the U.S. congregations sent delegates to regularly scheduled

conventions to discuss and decide the future of their shared ministries.

Eventually, some viewed this arrangement as cumbersome and suggested that one level of organization needed to be removed. So, in 1999, the binational General Conference dissolved, and since then, the two national conferences have functioned independently.

Both conferences now have a seat at the ICOMB table and are free to adapt the Confession of Faith that was approved by General Conference delegates in 1999. In 2014, USMB revised Article 13 on peacemaking, and in 2021 CCMBC considered revisions to Article 8: Christian Baptism.

For the past 20-plus years, both CCMBC and USMB have emphasized evangelism and church planting as well as discipleship and leadership development, although the methods of organizing their structures to meet these goals have changed—and continue to change.

Canada

In 2017, CCMBC reported more than 50,000 members in 250 congregations in seven provincial conferences. The Canadian conference experienced growth in spurts during the 20th century because of waves of Mennonite immigration into Canada. Many Mennonite Brethren were among some 20,000 Mennonites from Russia who entered Canada in the 1920s. Another wave of some 7,000

Mennonites entered Canada after World War 2. Both times, Canadian MB churches were impacted, bringing both positive energy and challenges to the existing Canadian MB family.

If immigration shaped CCMBC for much of the 20th century, the wider evangelical community of Canada strongly influenced its vision for the 21st century. Canada is a fundamentally secular country whose large size and small population have encouraged its evangelical churches to cooperate rather than compete. This cooperation rubbed off on Mennonite Brethren in the areas of evangelism and church planting.

Several church planting and church health initiatives have characterized CCMBC mission practice in the past decades. The Board of Evangelism and then Evangelism Canada, including the Key Cities Initiative, provided leadership. Until 2010, each provincial conference had its own board to oversee church planting efforts in that region. Then in 2011, C2C Network became the Canadian conference church-planting arm. In 2018, C2C merged with MB Mission, the North American MB mission agency. That merger lasted one year, and currently church planting is again the responsibility of provincial conferences.

CCMBC conducted a national review in 2011 that led to a revised mission statement—“to multiply Christ-centered churches to see Canada transformed by the good news of Jesus Christ”—and a ministry model that

emphasized partnerships with the provincial conferences in order to serve in four areas: building community, resourcing ministry, developing leaders and multiplying churches.

In 2018, CCMBC proposed a new Collaborative Model to assist the conference to better achieve its mission to serve churches and transform Canada. This new model combines church giving to the provincial and national conferences and moves decision-making to the provincial conferences. A national director helps to facilitate collaboration between provincial and national conferences and to represent Canada to international groups such as the International Community of Mennonite Brethren.

CHAPTER 11

Inter-Mennonite Connections

To be part of the Mennonite Brethren family is to be part of the larger Anabaptist family tree. “Our family is God’s way of taking really good care of us,” is a familiar sentiment and one that fits the larger Mennonite family. To be Mennonite Brethren is to know that when calamity strikes a member of this extended family, the rest of the Anabaptist family will come to your aid. It is to know, further, that assistance is extended not only to other family members but also to needy strangers “in the name of Christ.”

Since 1941, this phrase, “In the name of Christ,” has been stamped or affixed to relief supplies distributed by Mennonite Central Committee, the oldest inter-Mennonite agency. During and after World War 2, MCC’s work stretched across Europe and aided thousands of families devastated by war. In London, England, MCC workers Eileen and John Coffman were sharing clothing

from MCC with families who had lost their homes and were living in underground shelters.

In April 1941, the couple wrote to MCC leaders suggesting that a label be included on donated clothing with a “little slogan such as, ‘In the Name of Christ’ (that would) be useful in promoting the cause of Christ, as we administer the clothing which is made and donated by our people.”

Soon, “in the name of Christ” began to appear not only on clothing but also on relief supplies such as comforters, Christmas bundles and cans of meat. Through this simple phrase, MCC’s identity and reason for being has reached millions of people—not only in Europe, but in countries throughout Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.

Working Together to Serve Others

North American Mennonites first rallied together 100 years ago in 1920 when a delegation of Mennonites from Russia visited North America. Mennonites in Russia were facing extreme hardships from the political upheaval and extreme famine in their country, and they appealed to their brothers and sisters on this continent for assistance. North American Mennonites responded in two ways: providing relief and assisting with immigration.

Anabaptists in the U.S. formed a united relief agency, Mennonite Central Committee. A Mennonite Brethren

from Hillsboro, Kansas, P.C. Hiebert, was chosen to lead the fledgling agency. Under MCC, Anabaptists in Canada and the U.S. raised \$1 million and sent three American workers to deliver aid to Russian and Ukrainian villages. Food kitchens were established, and seeds and tractors were sent to help with land cultivation.

Inter-Mennonite cooperation embraced a new cause in Canada and the U.S. during World War 2. Mennonites in both countries had to face conscription. Thanks to the efforts of leaders from the historic peace churches, conscientious objectors (COs) were given the option to perform civilian alternative service work of “national importance.”

In Canada, about 7,500 of the 10,851 conscientious objectors were Mennonites. In the U.S., 38 percent (4,665) of the 12,000 men who requested CO status were Mennonites. Many Mennonite COs would have preferred to do relief work in war-torn countries or on the battleground as medics, but national policy did not allow for these options until much later. The administration of Civilian Public Service was a cooperative arrangement in which the U.S. government assumed responsibility for the work projects, while church agencies assumed responsibility for camp life and the nonworking time of the men. The church agency responsible for Mennonite CPS camps was MCC, which operated a total of 23 base camps.

The first alternative service camps were opened in 1941. CPS workers fought forest fires, built roads,

constructed dams, planted trees, built contour strips on farms, served as “guinea pigs” for medical and scientific research, built sanitary facilities for hookworm-ridden communities and cared for people with mental illnesses and juvenile delinquents.

The experience of strangers forced to live and work together had a profound impact on the young men. “This movement of young men (and volunteer women) from a wide variety of Mennonite groups into service camps has probably had a more profound effect on North American Mennonites than any other single experience,” says Lowell Detweiler, Mennonite Disaster Service director from 1986 until 1998. “Once the ‘quiet in the land,’ Mennonites began to look outward for service ministries (Detweiler, 32).

The men came home with new skills, new friendships and a belief in the value of service. They rallied their home communities to support new forms of service, believing they needed to serve not only in wartime but in peacetime too. Service to the wider world was part of what it meant to be Christian.

The CO experience spawned Mennonite Disaster Service, Mennonite Voluntary Service and Mennonite PAX service. Many Mennonite Brethren participants found their way to Bible school or Bible college and became leaders in the MB church.

Because of their CPS experience, mental health became a rallying cause among Mennonites after

World War 2. During the war, CPS workers assigned to mental health institutions found the hospital situations desperate. Eventually, American conscientious objectors who had worked in the hospitals of 22 states shared their observations with the public to help effect reform. Based on the documentary evidence gathered over four years by CPS men, the May 6, 1946, issue of *Life* magazine exposed the deplorable state of affairs. The article said: “Through public neglect and legislative penny-pinching, state after state has allowed its institutions for the care and cure of the mentally sick to degenerate into little more than concentration camps on the Belsen pattern.”

In some situations, CPS men influenced practices at state hospitals by reforming them. In most cases, the Mennonite CPS units in a state hospital are not remembered for their focus on reforms, but as people who did an honest day’s work and had a genuine interest in the patient.

“No other church group had ever had such a concentrated experience with mental illness as the American Mennonites during World War 2,” says Elmer M. Ediger, a former CPS volunteer who went on to serve as CEO of a Mennonite mental health hospital before his death. “During a four-year period, 1,500 Mennonites had a ‘hands on’ involvement with mental illness, which they shared freely with their home congregations. They developed a vision of what might be done with

rightly motivated psychiatric aids and mental health professionals.”

In 1947, MCC began its own mental health program. By 1967, MCC had established seven mental hospitals in the U.S. and one in Canada, and Mennonite Mental Health Services was formed as a subsidiary of MCC to oversee these institutions. Today these hospitals are independent community services, and Mennonite Health Services supports not only mental health centers but also retirement communities and developmental disabilities programs in North America and helps to link these agencies to Mennonite, Mennonite Brethren and Brethren in Christ churches.

MCC Turns 100

MCC is a global, non-profit organization that strives to share God’s love and compassion through relief, development and peacebuilding. In all its programs, MCC is committed to relationships with local partners and churches—their needs guide MCC’s priorities.

As an Anabaptist organization, MCC strives to make peace a part of everything it does. When responding to disasters, it works with local groups to distribute resources to minimize conflict. In its development work, MCC consults with communities to make sure projects meet their needs. MCC also advocates for policies that will lead to a more peaceful world.

Defining the ministry of MCC today is like the seven blind men who tried to describe an elephant by feeling a different part of its body—every part is unique and important, but the sum of the animal is greater than the individual parts. MCC is an agricultural worker in India and a restorative justice worker in the U.S. It is teaching women in Nepal to make super flour so that their families will get the nutrients they need and supporting health clinics in DR Congo in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

MCC was organized in 1920, making 2020 the agency's 100th birthday. MCC intended to celebrate its centennial in 2020, but in-person centennial celebrations were canceled or became virtual due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Reflecting on the relief agency's anniversary, J Ron Byler, MCC executive director from 2010 to 2020, says: "Throughout MCC's 100 years, MCC's staff and partners have had to be creative and resourceful in spite of challenges they encountered. This year (2020) has been no different, as we and our partners meet people's needs in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. But God has been faithful over all these years, helping us and guiding us as we share God's love and compassion in the name of Christ in the midst of crisis. For this we are thankful."

MCC's response to a crisis in Lebanon is one example of the challenges MCC faced in its ministry during the pandemic. In January 2020, people in Beirut, Lebanon,

were struggling. Massive political demonstrations in 2019 revealed the Lebanese people's dissatisfaction with their government. Schools closed, and the value of Lebanese currency dropped as inflation rose. The COVID-19 pandemic made matters worse, causing shops to close, employment opportunities to dry up and health needs to increase. Syrian and Palestinian refugees and Lebanese people who were living in poverty had even fewer resources than before.

And then, on Aug. 4, 2020, an improperly stored supply of ammonium nitrate exploded in the city's port, causing death, injuries and devastation of property throughout the city. This included the Karantina neighborhood, where many refugees, migrant workers and impoverished Lebanese people live.

Garry Mayhew, who serves with his wife as an MCC representative for Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, surveyed the damage the next day. "It looks like a war zone," he said.

The way forward in responding to the needs of the Lebanese people in this new crisis wasn't clear. And Lebanon wasn't the only place where MCC needed to determine and adapt its response. In countries around the world where MCC works, COVID-19 increased the need for health care and food while MCC and partner organization staff needed to protect their own health.

At the same time, the pandemic initially affected MCC's funding sources as donors' finances were impacted, relief sales were canceled and thrift shops were

temporarily closed. Nevertheless, MCC adjusted and continued to meet needs in the name of Christ.

In Beirut, MCC and its partners adapted their food distribution system by setting up appointments, using masks and physically distancing to protect the health of the recipients. Plans to rebuild homes and small businesses were made and children received support for their emotional and social health.

Around the world, MCC's health programs were strengthened through teaching COVID-19 prevention techniques, distributing hygiene and sanitation stations and making clean water available. Trainings for peacebuilding, healthcare and farming techniques went virtual where possible or took place individually or in outdoor group settings where people could spread apart. More canned meat was distributed in 2020 than usual in the U.S. to help people who were struggling financially. MCC, along with Mennonite Disaster Service and Everence Financial, funded grants to Anabaptist churches, often churches of color, that needed help to pay their staff or assist their members.

MCC's work continued with the support of its constituents who also adapted to COVID-19 by turning relief sales into virtual auctions, creating new fundraisers for families and increasing individual donations. COVID-19 made MCC's work more challenging, as was true for many organizations, with budget and staff positions cuts and suspension of new projects.

Mennonite Brethren support MCC in a variety of ways. Mennonite Brethren volunteer as MCC workers for both short- and long-term assignments.

We have been involved in initiating and staffing thrift shops that sell recycled goods to raise funds for MCC. Since its inception in 1972, MCC Thrift has grown into a network of nearly 100 shops across North America, supporting local communities and international ministry. In 2019, prior to COVID-19, MCC Thrift shops in Canada and the U.S. averaged more than \$1.2 million a month in revenue.

Mennonite Brethren also use their gifts to serve at Ten Thousand Villages, MCC U.S.'s Fair Trade social enterprise. Ten Thousand Villages provides vital, fair income by selling handicrafts and telling the stories of the people who made them. Ten Thousand Villages works with artisans who would otherwise be unemployed or underemployed. This income helps pay for food, education, health care and housing.

Mennonite Brethren also collect items for school, infant care, hygiene and relief kits that are distributed to vulnerable individuals around the world. And we come together with other volunteers at Material Resource Centers to stitch quilts and sew blankets to provide comfort to people who are facing crises. More than \$6 million is raised annually through 40 MCC relief sales across Canada and the U.S.

Mennonite Brethren have devised unique ways to support MCC. In some communities, Mennonite men have banded together to sing and use their concerts to raise awareness and funds for the cause. For example, the West Coast Mennonite Men's Chorus in California has been performing for more than 40 years and has raised more than half a million dollars for MCC.

MDS: North American Disaster Response

Established in 1950, Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) is probably the most grassroots of all inter-Mennonite agencies. MDS is a bi-national (Canada and the U.S.) agency that responds to disasters in these two countries on behalf of many Mennonite and related groups. Except for a small staff at headquarters in Akron, Pennsylvania, and a regional office in Winnipeg, Manitoba, volunteers make up the entire network. Local units are grouped into regions and each region has its volunteer leadership. MDS cooperates with other church and disaster response groups including the American Red Cross and The Salvation Army. MDS works in close cooperation with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and its state counterparts in the U.S. and the Emergency Measures Organization in Canada.

MDS is recognized among inter-Mennonite agencies as having the widest diversity of constituent support. Old Order Mennonites, Beachy Amish, Mennonite Church,

Mennonite Brethren, Brethren in Christ, Conservative Mennonites and others wear the MDS badge.

Steve Wiest, MDS West Coast operations coordinator and a member of Hope Kingsburg, a USMB congregation in Kingsburg, California, has a history of working with MDS and MCC. In 2021, Wiest was involved with MDS's work in Paradise, California, rebuilding some of the 13,000 homes destroyed in 2018 by the Camp Fire. The Camp Fire was the most destructive wildfire in California history and the worst in the U.S. in a century. Nearly three years later, the trauma was still raw for Paradise residents.

“People that live through a fire and had to run from the flames or run through the flames will suffer for the rest of their lives,” Wiest says. That’s why MDS volunteers take time to listen to the homeowners they are working with. Wiest says a big part of what MDS does is give people hope and help them heal. “We spend time listening to them tell their story,” Wiest says. With respect to the Paradise community, Wiest says, “It doesn’t take much to go around town and hear the stories of trauma. You talk to the checkout clerk at the grocery store or somebody you meet at the taco truck, and there are the stories.”

While MDS volunteers were in Paradise to rebuild homes destroyed three years ago, the 2021 fires added to California’s losses. As of Sept. 1, 2021, more than 3,600 buildings had been destroyed in 2021. The largest fire of the 2021 California wildfire season was the Dixie Fire,

which started in about the same place as the 2018 Camp Fire but moved in the opposite direction.

In one day, the Dixie Fire destroyed nearly all of the historic Gold Rush town of Greenville. As of August 2021, as the MDS crew worked, the Camp Fire was still growing, despite the efforts of more than 5,000 firefighters. MDS volunteers could sometimes see smoke clouds from wildfires 50 miles away. “You could smell the smoke, and sometimes see the cars covered with ash,” Wiest says.

MDS’s work in Paradise was complicated by COVID-19. As COVID-19 cases continued to grow in the Paradise area, MDS paused its work there in September 2021 and sent volunteers home before they were able to complete the six homes they had started. But they will be back to finish what they started.

Often the last to leave a disaster-affected community, MDS volunteers work to address unmet needs for the most vulnerable in the community. Whenever possible, homes built and repaired by MDS volunteers are constructed to withstand future disasters. In the process, homeowners often build long lasting relationships with the MDS volunteers who helped them recover and return home.

In 2020, Hurricane Laura crossed over homes MDS built after Hurricane Rita in 2005. Carl Dube, long time MDS volunteer project director, and others checked in with homeowners to see how the houses had fared.

“Their insurance adjuster said that there was no reasonable expectation for that house to still be there,”

Dube says. “They were excited to meet some of the people responsible for this house that withstood the 150-mph winds and storm surge two feet higher than the floor.”

Mennonites, Amish and like-minded Christians have a biblical understanding of faith that embraces a community of caring for each other and our neighbors. The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century cared for others. Their descendants, the Mennonites, have never been able to escape this heritage. In Europe, in North America and around the world, Mennonites have committed themselves again and again to service in Jesus’ name.

Why? Because we Mennonites believe that authentic faith is expressed in every dimension of life. One recurring theme of Menno Simons was that true faith should “bear fruit.” In his classic words, “True evangelical faith...cannot lie dormant, but manifests itself in all righteousness and words of love:...it clothes the naked; it feeds the hungry; it comforts the sorrowful; it shelters the destitute; it aids and comforts the sad.”

MWC: A Family of Faith

A significant snapshot of the larger Mennonite community is taken every six years when Anabaptists from around the globe gather in one location for a week-long celebration of kinship in Christ. Mennonite World Conference (MWC), a community of Anabaptist-related churches with offices in

Kitchener, Ontario, and Bogotá, Colombia, organizes the global family reunion.

The first MWC gathering was in Basel, Switzerland, in 1925, and drew representatives from North America, Holland, France and Germany. The 17th Assembly will be in Indonesia in 2022 at the invitation of the three Indonesian Mennonite denominations: Gereja Injili Di Tanah Jawa, Gereja Kristen Muria Indonesia and Sinode Jemaat Kristen Indonesia. Due to the global pandemic, the 2022 gathering will be a hybrid event.

U.S. Anabaptist groups, including U.S. Mennonite Brethren, hosted the 16th assembly, held in Pennsylvania in 2015. PA 2015 drew 8,454 registrants from 77 countries, and several hundred more were denied visas to enter the country. For example, Eastleigh Fellowship Choir from Kenya, who performed on the third evening of Assembly, was represented by only five of its 30 members due to denied visas.

“North American Mennonites keenly interested in genealogy and family names love to play ‘the Mennonite game’ by asking new acquaintances, ‘Do you know...?’ until they find a relative in common,” writes *MWC Courier* editor Karla Braun in her October 2015 editorial. “But as Mennonites and Brethren in Christ from 77 countries gathered in Pennsylvania...the Mennonite game wasn’t only about bloodlines. From all corners of the globe, it didn’t take long before we could find a connection: Mennonite Central Committee service workers,

missionary prayer lists, participants in the International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP) or Young Anabaptist Mennonite Exchange Network (YAMEN) exchanges and denominational bodies provided fertile ground for finding ‘relatives,’” writes Braun. “Our sense of kinship grew with every encounter at PA 2015: we sang in each other’s languages, built a house, canned vegetables, stitched quilts and comforters, were inked with henna designs, played football—together.”

The growing diversity of the global Anabaptist family is reflected in the officers, including the first general secretary from the Global South, César García (a Mennonite Brethren from Colombia) – along with J. Nelson Kraybill (president, USA), Rebecca Osiro (vice-president, Kenya), Sunoko Lin (treasurer, USA/Indonesia) and Henk Stenvers (president-elect, Netherlands).

“The unity of our global community has not been the result of human effort or something that we are able to produce,” says García. “It is a gift of God that we can enjoy today through the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst. True communion is made possible not by institutional laws and formalities, but by the work of Christ on the cross, where God created a new people including many cultures, races, tribes, and languages.”

The grand family reunion experience of Assemblies is not the only function of MWC. Formed in 2009, four commissions—Faith and Life, Peace, Deacons and Mission—are “chambers of the heart,” linking the global

community of Anabaptist-related churches for fellowship, worship, service and witness. Each commission consists of eight to 10 members selected by the Executive Committee for continental representation or specialist capacity.

The Faith and Life Commission receives and provides counsel on Christian faith and practice and represents Anabaptist perspectives in global conversations. The Peace Commission provides a forum for peace-related issues: supporting member churches facing peace struggles, conversing with churches asking questions about a peace identity and producing an annual worship resource for Peace Sunday. The Mission Commission provides MWC member churches with resources and a forum for dialogue on global witness and service. It brings together more than 120 Anabaptist global service and mission agencies.

The Deacons Commission focuses on the welfare of the churches within MWC, particularly in times of duress, and offers member conferences listening, prayer, encouragement and support in times of need. For example, since 2017, the Deacons Commission has responded to the humanitarian disaster in DR Congo caused by a rebel group in Kasai province.

“An alternative community to the political powers of today requires a transnational, cross-cultural, global community that lives out the Christian values of interdependency, love and equality,” says César García. “That kind of community is the only way of showing the

world that it is possible to overcome nationalisms and ethnocentrisms.”

MWC regional representatives build fraternal connections with churches in their region. These part-time volunteer staff are responsible for developing and supporting relationships with MWC member, associate-member and potential-member churches; local congregations; and MWC-related partners and agencies. MWC also facilitates face-to-face fellowship, personal encounters and cooperative experiences among its members through collaboration in MCC’s YAMEN (Young Anabaptist Mennonite Exchange Network), participation in the Global Anabaptist History profile, publications on Anabaptist history and theology, and the Young Anabaptists (YABs) committee.

At the Global Youth Summit at PA 2015, young adults wrote encouragements to Sang-Min Lee, the first Mennonite conscientious objector in South Korea, who was imprisoned for refusing to serve in South Korea’s military. Among the note writers was Oscar Suarez, a CO from Colombia, who has since been named Latin American representative to the YABs committee.

In Colombia, every 18-year-old man must complete one to three years of military service and earn a certificate of completion, without which, it is very hard to find employment. “My family is worried for my future because I don’t have this certificate, but they and my church are supportive of my decision,” the third-year music student

says. He is hopeful about the work of Justapaz and other advocacy groups.

Since 2009, some COs have been able to avoid military service on the grounds of faith. Also, objectors are now able to graduate from university without completing military service. However, each CO is still required to legally fight for these rights. Suarez's choice has started a discussion with the youth in his congregation.

“Young people are more interested in learning about the Anabaptist teaching of peace, and some teenagers are seriously considering not serving in the military,” he says. The church is also becoming more involved in sharing in the community about the message of conscientious objection. “Their support has strengthened my resolve. This challenge has brought my family, my church and the community together,” he says.

Through MWC, Christians find solidarity and support to live out their Anabaptist values of peace and community amid hardship or resistance. “As the Anabaptist-related majority moved to the global South, diversity between and within MWC member churches continued to increase, not only ethnically, culturally, linguistically and theologically, but also economically,” writes Larry Miller, MWC's general secretary from 1990-2012. “Disparity of wealth is one of the most basic obstacles to mutual blessing in the Anabaptist-Mennonite family of faith.”

Developing a greater mutuality between the churches of the North and South is the challenge facing the

Anabaptist family. MWC, together with other agencies, is attempting to guide the process. “It’s good to know that we are not alone,” says Francisca Ibanda, MWC regional representative for southern Africa and a Mennonite Brethren.

“Where our faith in Jesus Christ is the binding agent,” says MWC’s Braun, “everyone is family.”

Worldwide Membership

The 2018 Mennonite World Conference world directory shows that the number of baptized members in Anabaptist-related congregations in 86 countries now stands at 2,131,199, a huge increase from the 2000 directory that showed 1,203,995 baptized believers in 197 bodies in 63 countries.

Continent	2000	2015	2018
Africa	405,979	736,801	776,562
Asia/Pacific	184,049	431,313	438,671
Latin America & Caribbean	112,128	199,912	202,603
North America	443,918	582,559	649,903
Europe	57,912	64,610	63,360

In 2018, the other countries with more than 30,000 members were Tanzania (66,350), Thailand (63,518), Zimbabwe (50,287), Germany (47,492), Paraguay (36,009), Kenya (35,575), Mexico (34,041) and Angola (30,555).

The six countries with the most baptized Mennonite and Brethren in Christ members:

	2000	2015	2018
Ethiopia	73,219	255,493	510,912
USA	319,768	538,839	500,481
India	90,006	256,611	257,029
DR Congo	183,040	235,852	225,581
Canada	124,150	143,720	149,422
Indonesia	87,802	111,372	102,761

Guide to Inter-Mennonite Agencies

Inter-Mennonite agencies are often referred to by acronyms. Here is a list of some of the inter-Mennonite agencies in which Mennonite Brethren are involved. This list is not exhaustive.

Council of International Anabaptist Ministries

(CIM): North American Anabaptist mission agencies and affiliated overseas ministries

Everence: an Anabaptist stewardship ministry

Meetinghouse: a cooperating group of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ editors

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC): the relief, service and peace agency of North American Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches

Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS): a North American disaster relief agency

Mennonite Economic Development Associates

(MEDA): serves low-income people around the world through a business-oriented approach to development

Mennonite Health Services (MHS): supports health care agencies by connecting them to Mennonite and Brethren in Christ development

Mennonite World Conference (MWC): a fellowship of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches around the world

PART FOUR

Family Ties for the Future

CHAPTER 12

The Challenge for the Future

The quirky 1960s television show about a family “Lost in Space” got a reboot in 2018. In both the original and the remake, the Robinson family tests their survival skills in a strange new world. The Mennonite Brethren family resembles the “Lost in Space” TV family in some striking ways.

We live in what futurist philosophers are calling “The Postmodern World.” The postmodern environment is particularly challenging because it has proven impossible to label (it is the age after “modernism”) and difficult to describe. As Leonard Sweet writes, “If the Gutenberg [modern] world was a rage for order, regulation, stability, singularity and fixity, the Google [postmodern] world is a rage for chaos, uncertainty, otherness, openness, multiplicity and change.”

The Mennonite Brethren family also faces significant change within our denominational structures. This book was first published by the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren churches, a structure that voted itself out of existence in the last year of the old millennium

and shifted its ministries to the national conference. This book's United States revision is being published during a time when USMB is expanding staff and forming a new Church Planting Council to effectively move forward with its goals for 2025.

What can we anticipate for the Mennonite Brethren church of the future? What kind of survival skills will we need for this new century? What is the new reality? How will the shifts we experienced because of COVID-19 significantly shape ministry going forward?

The notion of postmodernism rests on a philosophy suggested by deconstructionist Jacques Derrida. According to Derrida and other communication theorists, ultimate reality is impossible to know. Each culture "constructs" its own reality by using words, by telling stories. If we as Christians use this terminology, we might say that the search for Ultimate Reality (whom we know as God) can be satisfied by finding our place in the "Ultimate Story" (God's saving act through Jesus Christ).

The Christian story makes the claim that the Word Jesus Christ reveals God as the Ultimate Reality. As Mennonite Brethren, we tell our own unfinished story as one expression of the search to truly experience God as the Ultimate Reality. We invite others to claim this narrative as their own story.

In the past, the Mennonite Brethren family struggled to define our central storyline. We were tempted to use ethnic cultural ties from our Russian past that included

our Low German heritage, but that descriptor was not persuasive in a family that includes Telegu speakers in India and French speakers in DR Congo. Theological distinctives, including both evangelical influences and Anabaptist roots, provide clues for the storyline.

Perhaps the most succinct way of identifying our story is to speak of the family that lives as a renewal missionary movement. Our renewal by the Holy Spirit is bound up with a commitment to a New Testament model of the discipling community. Our role in God's mission is to invite the world to live under the sovereign rule of Jesus the Lord. Mennonite Brethren are among those who make this story their own, those who accept adoption into this family with God as our parent.

The MB story, like the postmodern world in which we seek to find our way, is open-ended. The challenge of the future demands that we consider factors which shape our story and then ask, "How will our family ties empower us to offer a story that others will find compelling?"

Our first challenge is to tell the family story in a way that is both inclusive and distinct. As Mennonite Brethren we are pleased that a particular dialect or way of dressing can no longer identify us. We are glad that our churches increasingly welcome members from many ethnicities. We have lowered some theological barriers. The Lord's Supper is open to all who claim faith in Jesus, not just baptized believers. We've done our best not to let our "Anabaptist quirks" keep anyone away. We are doing well when

we avoid letting nonessentials distance us from fellow worshipers.

Yet, Jesus warns against seeking social acceptance. He says that those who face persecution for their commitment to God's rule are blessed (Matthew 5:11). To have a story worth telling in our pluralistic world, we will need to continue to center our story on the cross. We will follow Jesus—even at the cost of the death of our reputations and popularity. Historically, Mennonites have understood following Jesus as a call to radical social nonconformity. Our greatest challenge for the future is to choose and learn the lifestyle of the narrow way.

Second, our family will need proclaimers who can lead us into visualizing, describing and living out the story of God's rule. Leadership committed to “upside-down Kingdom” values (a term popularized by Donald Kraybill) will be essential to reach the postmodern world. The church must issue the challenge of self-sacrificial servant leadership to its best and brightest women and men—and be open to having them lead. Anabaptist church leadership is marked by mutuality, involving the community in ministry teams with its pastors.

Worshipping together is a vital practice for being shaped by the story. As we glorify God, we build community, and we build faith. Experience and participation are important values in the postmodern world, so our worship must balance fresh experience with tradition. Worship reinforces our corporate identity, offering vital communion with God

and the family of faith without succumbing to the siren song that compels us to seek to be novel, innovative and market-driven.

Third, family ties are demonstrated through distinctive relationships. Jesus said that his family would be identified by the remarkable love they have for each other (John 13:35). A renewal missionary movement expresses love through mutual care. If the Mennonite Brethren movement is to remain vital, it must be marked by sacrificial generosity. Like the modern world before it, the postmodern world lives by the bottom line. Use of money and possessions reveals our most deeply held values. With a global family that is desperately poor, we with Western wealth must invest profoundly in the kingdom proclamation of good news for the oppressed.

Finally, the future shape of our family will be determined by how well we maintain our family ties. Love is expressed by fellowship in ever-expanding circles. We are invited to move beyond individual piety to become part of the covenant community that is the church. Congregations partner with others in regional mission. A generation of visionary leaders with a burning passion for the Mennonite Brethren global family will lead us into a new partnership of equals with other national conferences.

More than 30 years ago theologian Howard Loewen outlined the Mennonite Brethren vision for building family ties. His words still ring true today. He called for:

(1) a growing awareness of our Anabaptist-pietist Christian roots;

(2) good news proclamation of Jesus' Kingdom for the poor;

(3) spiritual rebirth nurtured by spiritual discipline;

(4) biblical focus on obediently following Jesus; and

(5) kinship with the global family of God.

The Bible verse that Menno Simons placed on the title pages of all his writings is an appropriate benediction for this look at the family that bears his name: "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11).

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