

North American Mennonite Peacemakers and Their History

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In the spring of 2004, as I was preparing for a public forum in north-eastern Kansas commemorating the first anniversary of the U.S.-led war in Iraq, an essay on the backside of the magazine *The Mennonite* caught my eye. Pictured was my friend and fellow Kansan, Robert Kreider, historian and churchman, with a declarative title: “I am a Conscientious Objector to This War.” I read Kreider’s piece with interest:

I am a conscientious objector to the President’s ‘war on terrorism.’ I refuse to be drafted. For us, who are followers of Christ, let this be a time of attentive service—a time to shed fear, love our enemies, be hospitable, be patient, befriend the despised, seek the facts, declare the truth, be prudent, be vigilant, use our wits, contain our anger, build bridges, hope.¹

This clear-eyed statement *for* peace, in time of war, brings to the fore many of the ideas that North American Mennonite peacemakers have been grappling with in recent days and months. The language employed in his assertive essay is contemporary, even prophetic, but also rooted in our history as Anabaptists, seeking the way of nonviolence. Contemplating his words—and especially the forthright “I am a conscientious objector,” I realized how seldom we Mennonites invoke that phrase anymore. The military draft does not now exist in North America, nor has it for more than a generation. Mennonite citizens in the U.S. and Canada often choose to participate in “voluntary” service through church structures, but have no pressing need to do “alternative” service in lieu of military conscription, as many Mennonites in past generations did. Even so, there is increasing concern in the United States that compulsory conscription, banished since 1973, might return if government officials conclude that present-day “volunteer” armed forces are insufficient for pursuing U.S. military and political agendas abroad.

The governments of Canada and the United States, in recent history, have had historically different approaches to militarism. The U.S., with its greater economic and political power, especially in the

post-World War II years, has been drawn into military engagements more frequently and more extensively than its geographic neighbor. The government of the United States, with its superpower status in the years during and after the Cold War, played a far more aggressive role in world affairs than did Canada's government, which exercised more limited, cautious displays of power.

While Mennonites in both the U.S. and Canada have gone against the grain of their national cultures in wartime, these church/state conflicts have been especially sharp for American Mennonites critical of militaristic national priorities. Unlike many Mennonites in the U.S., Canadian Mennonites, have often managed to integrate faith-informed perspectives about peace with their national identity. Maintaining a "peace-minded" identity in a militarily-mobilizing culture is challenging. Since the calamitous events of 9/11, and the wars begun subsequently in Afghanistan and Iraq, American Mennonites in particular have found themselves part of a national culture that is deeply divided over threats to security and order.

For many Mennonites, living in a society that is waging a perpetual "war on terror" is troubling and unsettling. At Bluffton College in Ohio, where since 1987 the Lion and Lamb Peace Arts Center has offered resources including books, artworks, and films to help educate children about peace, staff members reported in 2003 that "these past two years have been most challenging with the United States waging war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Speaking to children about war and violent solutions to disputes has been difficult in a country where public moods swing from grand patriotism to disbelief, unrest, and powerlessness."²

Mennonite political scientist J. Robert Charles reminds us that surveys of recent peacemaking efforts by both Canadians and Americans can be troubling, "for they show how relatively insignificant and ineffective in dethroning war Mennonites and other pacifists were in one of the bloodiest centuries in the recorded history of humanity."³ Here indeed is a recurring motif – that while North American Mennonites may seek to be faithful to the promises of peace, they cannot always claim to be effective.

Nevertheless, there are at least three noteworthy dimensions to recent Mennonite peace developments. Each reflects a shift in post-World War II life toward increased engagement, in both Canada and the U.S., with political and civic structures. These developments include first, the reconceptualization of "peace" to include daily life issues *beyond* war, conscription, and anti-militarism; secondly, the assertion of a Mennonite "style" of peacemaking that is applicable to mediating disputes and addressing international conflicts; and third, the conveying of peace convictions, from traditional storytelling to other forms of artistic expression.

Anabaptist peace theology is carried partly through venues such as the writings of influential Mennonite thinkers and course work pursued at Mennonite educational institutions, as well as through hymns, Sunday School curricula, and participation in inter-Mennonite projects such as those sponsored by Mennonite Central Committee. Mid-century classic writings such as Guy F. Hershberger's *War, Peace and Nonresistance* (1944) and John Howard Yoder's *The Christian Witness to the State* (1964) laid theological foundations for Mennonites' emphasis on a "Lordship of Christ" over both the church and the wider world.⁴ A generation later, Mennonite theologian Ted Koontz characterized a move away from what had come to be known as "two-kingdom" theology, noting that "we must always think not in 'dualist' terms . . . but in terms that take account of three fundamental realities – the world, . . . the church, . . . and the kingdom."⁵ Social ethicist Duane Friesen, in his 1986 book *Christian Peacemaking and International Conflict* and in more recent work, has framed an Anabaptist-informed theological stance that encourages active Christian peacemaking grounded in "the wisdom of the Cross." Like other interpreters of the Mennonite peace tradition, Friesen asserts that Jesus offered a model in his life and teachings about how transformation of evil – by way of his nonviolent encounters—is carried on.⁶

Mennonite writings about peace continue to shape both our own theological commitments, as well as how others perceive us. Peace commitments as a practical, "lived-out" dimension of life and faith remain at the core of the church's identity. Mennonites as individuals may express this in casual encounters with others who want to know, "What do you believe?"

M.J. Heisey's new scholarship on the history of the Brethren in Christ, a group closely related to the Mennonites, is cautionary in this regard, since she charts a trajectory of *loss* of a peace emphasis in BIC churches over the past half-century. Heisey asserts that "the community's corporate peace stance weakened, as did its appreciation of being a unique, small community," and she suggests that by the late twentieth century the Brethren in Christ denomination's "course remained divided and unclear," beset by a perceived loss of Anabaptist values.⁷ Political scientist John H. Redekop, in his study on ethnicity and the Mennonite Brethren, reported similar findings for that denomination, commenting on an erosion in peace witness by the 1980s, which he attributed to "a decline of Anabaptist theology."⁸ Donald Kraybill and Leo Driedger's sociological survey of North American Mennonites, *Mennonite Peacemaking* (1994), correlated adherence to peace values with a theological orientation toward Anabaptism. Kraybill and Driedger noted that Mennonite groups with fundamentalist leanings tended to have weaker commitments to peace.⁹

Nevertheless, a peacemaking ethos remains firmly embedded in North American Mennonite life. One measure of this is the commitment of Mennonite institutions to peace-related issues. For example, Mennonite Central Committee, now in its ninth decade of administering relief, service, and development projects on behalf of a broad North American Mennonite constituency, articulates the integration of peace into its mission:

Peace and peacemaking are central in all aspects of [Mennonite Central Committee] MCC work Peace is a gift of God's grace, a state of quiet confidence and security, and a call to be a reconciling presence in all human relationships and situations. Peacemakers reach out to all people caught in fear, suffering, hate, oppression and violence. Peacemaking involves reflection, prayer, and an active, nonviolent witness to the structures that cause and perpetuate injustices and violence.¹⁰

MCC's roots are in the post-World War I era, when North American churches provided famine relief to Mennonite kin and others in the Soviet Union, but Mennonite Central Committee has come to embrace a much broader, and more explicitly defined peace agenda. In 1946, the MCC "Peace Section" opened as a part of the Akron, Pennsylvania, central office, offering peace education in the churches and assistance to conscientious objectors. By the time of the Vietnam War, the MCC Peace Section was offering more direct peace witness to the federal government, and MCC established its Washington, D.C., office in 1968.

Parallel developments occurred north of the border, with the establishment of MCC Canada in 1964 and its Peace and Social Concerns program, focusing on traditional Mennonite concerns such as finding alternatives to war. But MCC Canada also became involved in activities such as lobbying against capital punishment. MCC Canada's Ottawa office opened in 1975, and today works in partnership with the Peace Ministries Program of MCC on advocacy ranging from human rights for Aboriginal peoples to increased public aid for international development.¹¹ Historian Ted Regehr, in his landmark study of Canadian Mennonites, argues that the MCC peace offices "played very important roles in developing peace awareness The peace witness of various Mennonite groups would be substantially weaker without the nudging and encouragement of the Peace Section."¹² As a result of this sustained attention to peacemaking, Mennonites in both Canada and the U.S. have, in recent decades, invested creative energies in peace projects of all kinds.

Canadian attorney Wayne Plenert puts it this way: “One definition of Mennonites [is]. . . a group that wants restored health in conflicts. When one considers the Victim Offender Reconciliation Program, the Christian Peacemaker Teams, the mediation . . . training, and the strong programs in colleges and universities regarding conflict resolution; Mennonites are keenly interested in true peacemaking.”¹³ A notable example in the Canadian context is Project Ploughshares, begun in the mid 1970s to posit alternatives to militaristic national security strategies that impeded development in places such as Central America and South Africa. One of the founders of Project Ploughshares, Ernie Regehr, has had recent experience in studying southern Africa on assignment with MCC Canada, where, he later recalled, he had

witnessed firsthand the way in which military spending drained cash and military security obsessions drained energy and confidence from the development enterprise. The study project was premised on the ancient vision of transforming the material and human wealth now consumed by military preparations into resources for human development – hence ‘Project Ploughshares.’¹⁴

For the past quarter-century, this ecumenical program of the Canadian Council of Churches, with its roots in Mennonite peace concerns, has focused on research and advocacy for Canada’s contributions to a just and stable world order.

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Earlier in this essay we identified three developments in recent Mennonite peace theology and activism. The *broadening* of peace concerns is the first of those. Let us turn to a consideration of this development, and then examine the second and third developments, the assertion of a Mennonite “style” of peacemaking in diverse settings, *and* the linkage of North American Mennonites’ peace commitments to artistic expression and professional life.

In recent decades, North American Mennonites have applied notions of “peace” to a broader set of concerns – beyond conscription and antimilitarism – to everyday encounters in family and community settings. Feminist scholars within the Mennonite church have taken the lead in critiquing traditional Anabaptist theology, and even its emphasis on peace, as tending to bypass the experiences of women and other vulnerable individuals within the Mennonite fold. Women’s voices – including those of historians, theologians, and educators – have raised awareness of patriarchal structures and assumptions embedded

in the church's institutions, as well as in interpersonal relations. These critical voices have also underscored the importance of understanding the dynamics of conflict, including conflict that breaks out close to home.

To acknowledge the close proximity of violence to our own lives, as Mennonite theologian Gayle Gerber Koontz notes, is "to increase the scope of the peace theology agenda."¹⁵ In an important essay laying out feminist experience and its relevance for Mennonite life, she and her colleagues have helped to move Mennonite thinking about peace onto new terrain, including the consideration of violence against women (and domestic violence more generally) in the context of North American life. Theologians, social workers, and health care providers have explored ways in which the church's longstanding emphases on "peace" and "nonresistance" have inadvertently contributed to the oppression of some women. That is, these ideals have led to passivity and silent politeness in the face of abuse. Suffering and powerlessness have, in some churches and homes, been glorified or elevated to virtues. Embedded in this critique is a direct call to action for Mennonites to work for justice and dignity in *all* human relations.¹⁶

This challenge resonates with many North American Mennonites, who, on the one hand, are sincere in wanting to embrace mutuality and human dignity, but, on the other hand, struggle in predicting where emerging peace theologies might lead. An example of ongoing tensions is illustrated by Carol Penner's recent study (presented at an MCC conference in August 2004) with the head-turning title, "How Inclusive is the Inclusive Church: Congregations . . . Including People Who Have Committed Sexual Offenses Against Children."¹⁷ One might consider too the work of Harvard University professor Gordon Kaufman whose earlier book, *In Face of Mystery* (1993), and more recent volume *In the Beginning . . . Mystery* (2004) draw deeply from the Mennonite peace tradition in an ambitious constructive theology. In his work, Kaufman places high on the Christian agenda pressing ecological and environmental problems, alongside feminist and humanitarian concerns.¹⁸

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If the *broadening* of peace concerns is significant, so too is the assertion of a Mennonite "style" of peacemaking. The work of John Paul Lederach and his colleagues at Eastern Mennonite University is a recent example of the melding of Mennonite peace theology with conflict transformation theory. One observer notes that Lederach has "pioneered the adaptation of his tradition's pacifist 'theology of involvement' into regions of deep and intractable violence across the world."¹⁹

Lederach's "peacebuilding" work in Central America and elsewhere has drawn broad attention from non-Mennonites interested in conflict transformation. During the summer of 2004, for example, 185 persons from forty countries – including five from Iraq — came to the Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) campus in Virginia for seminars taught both by North American Mennonites with specialized training *and* by visiting teachers from agencies such as the South African-based International Center for Transitional Justice. The EMU campus also hosts Fulbright Peace Scholars for international training on an ongoing basis.²⁰

As Mennonite institutions and practitioners join with international partners in peacebuilding, we see an emerging "style" of peace activism that grows out of Mennonites' work in international contexts. In John Paul Lederach and Cynthia Sampson's book *From the Ground Up* (2000), contributors from outside the Mennonite tradition point out discernable practices valued within a Mennonite peace tradition. Ironically, these are practices that many Mennonites might take for granted: 1) cultivating relationships over long periods; 2) practicing cultural sensitivity; 3) assisting peacemakers within local settings, using resources at hand; 4) valuing humility and respecting parties on both sides of a conflict without aiming to "convert."²¹

Using these insights, some North American Mennonites have recently begun exploring new avenues for peacemaking. Mennonite Central Committee's "Peace Theology Project," begun three years ago by a team of Canadians and Americans, is one such initiative. This project, with research and consultation in urban and more rural settings across North America, has focused on the work that Mennonite lawyers, corrections and police officers, and government officials are doing to contribute to a more just (and less violent) society.

Participants in this study affirm their own Mennonite peacemaking patterns and traditions, but also consider the ethical implications of real-world techniques used to address conflict, such non-lethal force applied by law enforcement officials. MCC theology project team member Duane Friesen notes that "the tension we have as Mennonites is how we can support a justice emphasis in peacebuilding and further add the more aggressive methods of nonviolent direct action, litigation, and even coercive force as a part of our peacebuilding, without thereby undermining the very qualities and values which is the gift of our heritage to the peacebuilding process."²² The emphasis here is on contributions that Mennonite peacemakers might make in their communities, as citizens who are engaged (occupationally or through voluntarism) in community life and governance.

As we have seen, Mennonite peacemaking seeks to integrate peace commitments into the everyday fabric of North American life. Mennonites have long aimed to convey this through storytelling – whether orally, or through autobiography, film, or poetry. Recently published memoirs in this vein include the late Atlee Beechy’s *Seeking Peace: My Journey* (2001), and Justina Neufeld’s *A Family Torn Apart* (2003).²³ In the arts, Duane Johnson’s new play on the Middle East, *Above the Waters of Galilee* (2004) is a Mennonite perspective on the life of Palestinian Christian and peacemaker Elias Chacour.²⁴ In these Mennonite-produced works, we see how various genres in the arts offer avenues for upholding peace as a central tenet. Another related form in North American storytelling goes beyond individual or community perspective, seeking to bind narrative threads around national identity and history.

In 2001, for example, the historian James Juhnke of Bethel College, together with Carol Hunter of Earlham College, published *The Missing Peace*, a U.S. history text that critiques and reassesses assumptions about the inevitability of violence. This volume represents peace education for a broad audience. The book ranges over some three centuries of American history and engages the interests of readers from many different backgrounds. The authors note that they want to identify a myth of “redemptive violence” and to demonstrate how much more constructive is the stance of nonviolent social and political engagement. In *The Missing Peace*, they bring to life many historical figures – from Native American peace chiefs to abolitionists to civil rights workers – who sought reconciliation and justice through non-violent means. Some of these contributors to peace were Mennonites; others were not. In its evocation of alternatives to sanctioned violence, *The Missing Peace* offers hope for North Americans who yearn for peace in their communities, nation, and world. James Juhnke suggests that this work is “not simply an indictment of the strains of violence in our past, but a call to positive transformation of our social, political, and cultural institutions.”²⁵

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Present-day Mennonites in North American settings are committed to peace, and define their interests much more broadly than the traditional concerns of finding alternatives to war. Increasingly, American and Canadian Mennonites are partnering with other “peace-builders” at home and internationally to contribute to possibilities for reconciliation. North American Mennonites also continue to share and develop resources for peace education, from the telling of personal stories to works that carry peace values for broad dissemination.

Recently John Esau, a retired Mennonite pastor, wrote a lament for present-day violence in the world, and for the “unknown consequences” of the current war in Iraq. “Let the record show,” he said, “that we [Mennonites] will not be silent. Prayers can be voiced. Petitions for peace can be heard in our churches and in our homes.”²⁶ Indeed, North American Mennonites’ calls for peace extend well beyond our own families and communities. By valuing – and building – peace, Mennonites convey hope for a more just world. In continuity with our Anabaptist past, this hopefulness, expressed in so many ways, is essential to our faith and life.

Notes

- ¹ Robert Kreider, “I am a Conscientious Objector to This War,” *The Mennonite*, 2 March 2004, 18.
- ² Lion and Lamb Peace Arts Center 2003 statement, Bluffton College, Bluffton, Ohio, <http://www.bluffton.edu/lionlamb>.
- ³ J. Robert Charles, review of *Challenge to Mars: Pacifist From 1918 to 1945*, ed. Peter Brock and Thomas P. Socknat, 1999, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 78 (January 2004): 147.
- ⁴ See the discussion of Hershberger’s and Yoder’s work in Duane K. Friesen, “Updated Reflections” draft, 8 January 2004, Mennonite Central Committee Peace Theology Project, p. 89, unpublished, in the author’s possession. See also John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, rev. ed. (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2002).
- ⁵ Ted Koontz, quoted in Kraybill and Driedger, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1994), 257. See also Koontz, “Mennonites and the State: Preliminary Reflections,” in *Essays in Peace Theology and Witness*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1988), 46-54.
- ⁶ Duane K. Friesen, “Social Order and the Threat to Human Security,” Faculty Seminar Presentation, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas, 8 March 2004, notes in the author’s possession. See also Friesen, *Christian Peacemaking and International Conflict: A Realist Pacifist Perspective* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1987).
- ⁷ M. J. Heisey, *Peace and Persistence: Tracing the Brethren in Christ Peace Witness Through Three Generations* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2003), 3, 11.
- ⁸ John H. Redekop, *A People Apart: Ethnicity and the Mennonite Brethren* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1987), 17. Quotation from Driedger and Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking*, 246.
- ⁹ Driedger and Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking*, 241-44.
- ¹⁰ Mennonite Central Committee website, www.mcc.org/peacecommit.html.
- ¹¹ MCC Canada website, www.mennonitecc.ca/canada/peace/.
- ¹² Quoted in Ted Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970: A People Transformed* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 394.
- ¹³ Wayne Plenert, “Lawyers and Mennonites: The Dilemma of Different Peacemakers,” 15 June 2004, draft for conference “Seeking the Welfare of the City: Public Peace, Justice and Order,” http://www.mennonitecc.ca/peacetheology/Lawyers_Mennonites.pdf.

- ¹⁴ Ernie Regehr, "Project Ploughshares," in *Coalitions for Justice*, ed. Christopher Lind and Joe Mihevc (Ottawa: Novalis, 1994). For more information on Project Ploughshares, see <http://www.ploughshares.ca/>.
- ¹⁵ See Gerber Koontz, "The Trajectory of Feminist Conviction," *Conrad Grebel Review* 5 (Fall 1987): 201-220. Quotation from her introductory essay in *Peace Theology and Violence Against Women*, ed. Elizabeth G. Yoder (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992), 2.
- ¹⁶ Yoder, ed., *Peace Theology and Violence Against Women*, 120.
- ¹⁷ The conference titled "Seeking the Welfare of the City: Public Peace, Justice, and Order," was held in Akron, Pennsylvania, Aug. 1-4, 2004.
- ¹⁸ Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); and *In the Beginning . . . Creativity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).
- ¹⁹ Larry Dunn, review of *From the Ground Up: Mennonite Contributions to International Peacemaking*, ed. John P. Lederach and Cynthia Sampson, *Direction* 31 (Spring 2002): 117.
- ²⁰ Chris Edwards, "Peacebuilding Institute Gets Underway at EMU," *Mennonite Weekly Review*, 13 May 2004, 7.
- ²¹ See Sally Engle Merry, "Mennonite Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation: A Cultural Analysis," and Mark Gopin, "The Religious Component of Mennonite Peacemaking and its Global Implications," both in *From the Ground Up: Contributions to International Peacebuilding*, ed. John P. Lederach and Cynthia Sampson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 203-17, 233-55; see also discussion by Friesen, "Updated Reflections," 8.
- ²² Friesen, "Updated Reflections," 8.
- ²³ Atlee Beechy, *Seeking Peace: My Journey* (Goshen, Ind.: Pinchpenny Press, 2001); and Justina Neufeld, *A Family Torn Apart* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2003).
- ²⁴ Duane Johnson, *Above the Waters of Galilee* (Topeka, Kans.: Southern Hills Mennonite Church, 2004).
- ²⁵ James Juhnke and Carol Hunter, *The Missing Peace* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2001); quotation from Juhnke, "Introduction," [to the forum on *The Missing Peace*], *Fides et Historia* (Summer/Fall 2002): 3.
- ²⁶ John A. Esau, "Once Again, 'Bring Us Peace,'" *Mennonite Weekly Review*, 13 May 2004, 5.