

Canadian Mennonites and the Anabaptist Vision

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Introduction

The demise of the Anabaptist vision in recent decades has prompted many scholars to probe the question of Mennonite identity.¹ While some have despaired of defining an Anabaptist or Mennonite identity, others have made new proposals. James Juhnke has suggested a bipolar understanding of Mennonite reality based on two historical families.² One pole is the Swiss-South German, with its own distinctive two-kingdom theology, and the other the Dutch-North German with its more positive orientation toward social-cultural possibilities and its more ecumenical tone.³ Rodney Sawatsky has responded by calling for a more thoroughgoing pluralism⁴ and a return to normativity.⁵

Although both Juhnke and Sawatsky refer briefly to the significance of the Canada-US border and acknowledge the necessity of writing national histories, neither probes deeply into that issue. Both are also preoccupied with the question of identity as expressed by (Old) Mennonites, on the one hand, and by the General Conference Mennonites on the other. The former assumed the precedence of the Swiss-South German Anabaptism and defined the Anabaptist vision accordingly. Some of the latter, however, proposed alternative visions of Mennonite reality but on the whole failed to receive much of a hearing. The so-called "easy demise" of the normative Anabaptist vision⁶ has been partially

explained as resulting from the discomfort of Dutch-Russian Mennonites with the Bender school. Juhnke and Sawatsky make occasional references to Mennonite Brethren (MB), but there is no careful analysis of how MBs fit (or don't fit) into the paradigms being proposed. It would appear that the investigation needs to be even more multidimensional, and in particular that the significance of national boundaries be considered alongside the denominational, ethnocultural and diverse other factors that impinge on Mennonite self-understanding. Paul Toews has given an insightful analysis of Mennonite Brethren identity, but also without reference to national boundaries.⁷

The above comments are not intended to suggest that the unique character of Canadian Mennonitism has not been noted by a number of scholars familiar with the total North American Mennonite scene. Leo Driedger and John Redekop, for example, have analyzed some of the distinctive national characteristics.⁸ Some of the differences derive from different political contexts, some from different migration patterns, some from denominational demographics, and others from less visible factors. The experiences during the two world wars and during the Vietnam war, the immigration of large numbers of *Russlaender* during the 1920s and of the refugees after World War II to Canada, and the different educational environments are some of the obvious events and circumstances which have led to different expressions of Mennonite peoplehood. Mennonite institutions, such as Mennonite Central Committee and the Bible schools and colleges, have developed very differently in Canada than in the United States. While it is certainly true that the differences between various Mennonite groups within each country are greater than the differences between Mennonites of the same denomination in the two respective countries, there are nevertheless some issues on which the national boundary has been very determinative in shaping Mennonite identity.

The purpose of this paper is to attempt to assess and evaluate the reception and impact of Bender's "Anabaptist vision" among Canadian Mennonites. While the title of the paper is very general, the scope will be somewhat narrower. The scope will be limited to the two largest Mennonite denominations in Canada, the Conference of Mennonites in Canada (CMC) and the Mennonite Brethren (MB), both of whom are primarily of Dutch-Russian origin, and will focus especially on the period until about 1975. The paper will attempt to demonstrate that the Canadian Mennonite Brethren were more captivated by Bender's Anabaptist vision than the CMCs, and also more than their United States MB counterparts. It should be noted at the outset, however, that the Evangelical Mennonite Conference (formerly *Kleine Gemeinde*) was also profoundly affected by Bender's Vision and that an analysis of that influence promises some interesting results.⁹

In general terms it needs to be noted that the only major settlement of Mennonites of Swiss-South German descent in Canada occurred in Ontario, beginning in 1786. Most of these groups maintained close connections with their coreligionists in the US and some therefore were an integral part of the

recovery of the Anabaptist vision that was taking place in the (Old) Mennonite Church there. A relatively small number of Mennonites of Swiss-South German descent in Canada became part of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the CMC. The impact of the international boundary on the Swiss-South German Mennonites was probably less than on other Mennonite groups, at least until about 1970.

The first major migration of Mennonites of the Dutch-Russian stream to North America occurred in the 1870s, with a large number migrating to the American mid-west and another somewhat smaller number migrating to the Canadian west, especially to Manitoba. No Mennonite Brethren came to Canada during that migration. Those Mennonites who later became part of the General Conference of Mennonites migrated to both countries, but significantly more to the US. These different patterns of migrations of different groups to the two countries has had a significant impact on the later evolution of each of the groups and is of significance for our analysis of the reception of the Anabaptist vision by each group.

Harold S. Bender and Canadian Mennonites

Harold S. Bender had many occasions to interact with Canadian Mennonites of the Dutch-Russian stream both within Canada and elsewhere at various occasions such as the Mennonite World Conferences, peace conferences, and on matters pertaining to the Mennonite Central Committee and refugee work. Shortly before Canada became involved in World War II, an inter-Mennonite conference was held at the Winkler MB Church in Manitoba to discuss problems relating to military service. Bender was invited as guest speaker as well as to represent the (Old) Mennonites of Ontario. He expressed his conference's strong opposition to involvement in the military in any form. This was in contrast to Canadian leaders like Benjamin B. Janz who were prepared to render some forms of service such as in the medical corps.¹⁰ Despite some differences, Bender expressed his strong satisfaction at the result of the meeting.

Other significant occasions at which Bender addressed Canadian Mennonites included peace conferences (e.g., at Bergthaler Church in Altona on March 7, 1950¹¹) and the centennial celebrations of the MB Church at the Winnipeg auditorium on May 22, 1960. Finally, just prior to Bender's death, Erland Waltner read Bender's keynote address at the Mennonite World Conference on August 1, 1962, in Kitchener, Ontario. Bender himself appeared to share his vision for the Mennonite World Conference later during the conference.

The address at the MB centennial celebrations is particularly interesting, both because of its content and because of the source of the invitation, as will be seen below. Bender's address was essentially a review of church history, and it suggested that the MB renewal was a renewal of the Anabaptist vision.¹² At the same time Bender was careful not to offend those from whom the MBs had

seceded, and insisted that it was impossible to speculate about whether renewal could have happened without secession.

Bender had close friends among the Dutch-Russian Mennonites in Canada. These included Bishop David Toews of Rosthern and Cornelius F. Klassen of Winnipeg. Klassen, an MB, spent many years in refugee work in Europe. In his 1960 address in Winnipeg Bender singled out Klassen as "the dearest friend to me in all the Mennonite groups outside of my own."¹³ Klassen himself became so fond of Bender that he hoped that at least one of his children might eventually study under Bender in Goshen—a hope fulfilled after Klassen's death.¹⁴ Bender's correspondence with B.B. Janz of Coaldale, Alberta, ranged over a period of over twenty years, beginning in 1940.¹⁵

The Mennonite Brethren in Canada

Although the Mennonite Brethren Church in Canada officially began in 1888 as a result of outreach efforts from the US, MB membership remained small and was concentrated in Manitoba and Saskatchewan until the large influx of *Russlaender* in the 1920s. Church leaders had relatively little theological education and the only MB institution established before 1925 was the Herbert Bible School (1913). The most prominent member of the teaching faculty was William J. Bestvater, who had absorbed American dispensationalism and had disseminated his views widely through preaching, teaching and writing.¹⁶ Bestvater's dispensationalism, however, probably never took on the more combative elements of American fundamentalism.

When the *Russlaender* Mennonites arrived, they quickly established Bible schools in every region of the country. From 1925 to 1947 at least eighteen MB Bible schools were founded, most in the 1930s.¹⁷ Several, particularly Winkler (Pniel) and Bethany, had a supporting constituency which included the earlier *Kanadier* as well as the *Russlaender*, while most were established by *Russlaender*. Where the two groups worked together, disagreements and tension frequently developed, at least partly as a result of different visions of the Christian/Mennonite faith.

But the *Russlaender* MBs were by no means all of one theological stripe.¹⁸ There were those who had been deeply influenced by the Plymouth Brethren movement, centered at the Blankenburg conferences in Germany. Jacob W. Reimer was one of these. He and his associates are often held responsible for importing a dispensationalist theology and, more particularly, for diluting the teaching of nonresistance among Russian Mennonites. He may thus have prepared the ground for the Mennonite *Selbstschutz* during the revolution and civil war in Russia.¹⁹ When Reimer and others of like mind came to Canada, they disseminated their views widely and found a positive reception among those who had already imbibed the American version of dispensationalist theology through Bestvater.

In the 1930s and 1940s dispensationalist theology was quite prevalent in the Canadian MB Bible schools. A number of leaders, particularly from the *Kanadier* MBs, also attended such schools as Biola and Moody in the United States during the 1930s.

There was, however, another stream of MB theology which flowed from Russia to Canada in the 1920s. In time many of the most prominent leadership positions were held by individuals in this stream. Abraham H. Unruh is the best example. Unruh and two of his colleagues, who had been teachers at the Tschongrau Bible School in Russia, helped to establish Winkler (Pniel) Bible School in 1925. Although Unruh never systematically repudiated dispensationalism, he did express serious concerns about aspects of it and clearly had a different theological agenda and a more distinctive vision of Mennonite peoplehood.²⁰ He never mastered the English language and never fully accomplished the transition to the North American environment. Nevertheless, it was Unruh who helped set a direction for the Canadian Mennonite Brethren which was different from the American Mennonite Brethren. Other leaders, notably Benjamin B. Janz, were also cautious about adopting the theology and techniques of North American fundamentalism and revivalism.²¹

The Mennonite Brethren Bible College and its Faculty

The founding of the Mennonite Brethren Bible College (MBBC) in 1944 marked a new stage in the evolution of Canadian MBs in particular and of Canadian Mennonites as a whole. MBBC was the first advanced theological training school established by Mennonites in Canada and it also marked a clear assertion of a Canadian MB identity distinct from the US MBs. Although Canadian MBs had cooperated with US MBs in the sponsorship of Tabor College and in the missions program, there were frequent tensions.²²

But MBBC was also unique in other respects. A.H. Unruh was the founding father of the school and its first president. He soon stamped his own character on the institution. He and most of the faculty of MBBC were not in tune with American fundamentalism. Some, to be sure, preached dispensationalism, including Henry H. Janzen, the third president.²³ But within little more than a decade MBBC became known in the MB constituency as a distinctively Anabaptist institution, often in contrast to the prevailing theologies in the Bible institutes. The result was that during the period that most of the MB pastors and leaders were being educated at MBBC they usually emerged with a commitment to Anabaptism. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why Canadian MBs measured higher on the Anabaptist scale than their American counterparts in the several studies that were done.²⁴ The man most responsible for articulating and promoting this Anabaptist vision, both in the college and in the MB constituency, was John A. Toews (1912-1979).

Toews was born in Russia prior to the revolution.²⁵ He was a young lad when

he moved to Canada with his parents in 1926, thus receiving most of his education in North America. Toews's father was Aaron A. Toews, an educator and writer who had compiled a list of Mennonite martyrs, eventually published in two volumes as *Mennonitische Maertyrer* (1949-1954).

John Toews received part of his theological education at the Prophetic Bible Institute in Calgary, a school that was founded by the fundamentalist preacher and premier of the province of Alberta, William Aberhart.²⁶ During World War II Toews was active in ministry to the young men in alternative service camps and this, no doubt, compelled him to reflect deeply on issues of Mennonite identity and brought him into contact with many other Mennonites. But his ministry in the 1940s was primarily in the area of evangelism.

Toews was first invited to join the faculty at MBBC in 1945, but he did not accept until a second invitation came in 1947. Before long Mennonite history became his main teaching area. In 1950 he received his Bachelor of Divinity degree from United College in Winnipeg. His thesis topic was "The Anabaptist Concept of the Church."²⁷ It became most evident that he had drunk deeply at the wells of the new Anabaptist scholarship and that Bender's Vision had become central in his thinking.

The remainder of Toews's career was focused on disseminating the Anabaptist vision among his own people. Toews became active in inter-Mennonite organizations such as peace conferences, Mennonite World Conference and Mennonite Central Committee. In 1951 he was present at a peace conference in Alberta where Bender was the main speaker. Later Toews was the speaker at a peace conference in St. Jacobs, Ontario, impressing a largely (Old) Mennonite audience.²⁸ In 1955 his booklet *True Non-resistance through Christ* was published, which was long regarded as the definitive statement on nonresistance for Mennonite Brethren. When Toews left MBBC in 1967 it was partly because of a concern that the new leadership was moving in a direction that would take the college away from its singular commitment to Anabaptism.²⁹ After several years, first as pastor, and then as a faculty member at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno and at Trinity Western College in Langley, British Columbia, Toews returned to Winnipeg to teach and to become involved with the newly established Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies. His final assignment was therefore at the heart of his concern—to disseminate the Anabaptist vision among Mennonite Brethren.

During his career at MBBC as well as elsewhere Toews was a very popular speaker at conferences and other special occasions. Usually Anabaptism was woven into his presentations in very substantial ways, even when the topic was not specifically related to Anabaptism. He was more in agreement with Bender and the Swiss Mennonites than with some of his own denomination's leaders on such issues as enlistment in the medical corps. His two-kingdom theology was much more pronounced than that of many other MB leaders. He spoke out strongly against patriotism and participation in politics at the federal level.³⁰ The most frequent themes in his addresses and writings related to discipleship,

peace, missions, and the nature of the church. All of these were related to his understanding of Anabaptism.

Toews was also the author of the definitive history of the MB Church in the English language. It was here that his understanding of the MB church as a return to the vision of the early Anabaptists was articulated most clearly. The first chapter of the book is entitled "Spiritual Heirs of the Early Anabaptists." Although Toews acknowledged organizational fragmentation among Anabaptists in the sixteenth century, he still clearly identified certain groups as "mainline" Anabaptists.³¹ Bender's definition of the Anabaptist vision (as derived from Menno rather than Schleithem) is explicitly affirmed by Toews.³² The second chapter then documents the "fall of the church" in subsequent Mennonite history, and is entitled, "From Believers' Church to Parish Church."³³

In a later chapter Toews returns to defining the distinctives of the Mennonite Brethren movement.³⁴ Although Toews identifies Pietist and Baptist influences as significant in the founding of the MB Church, the main emphasis is on the influence of the early Anabaptists, particularly that of Menno Simons. His understanding of that Anabaptist influences is basically in agreement with Bender's view.

Another Mennonite Brethren leader who was captivated by the Anabaptist vision, especially during the 1950s and 1960s, was Frank C. Peters (1920-1987). Peters was a close associate of J.A. Toews for many years, although he was somewhat younger. He also migrated to Canada in the 1920s and received all his education in North America. During World War II he was a conscientious objector and served in the forestry camps. After the war he spent several years at Tabor College where he earned his B.A. and B.Th. degrees. Eventually he earned a Th.D. degree from Central Baptist Seminary (1957) and a Ph.D. degree in Psychology from the University of Kansas (1959). In the meantime he had also completed a M.Th. degree at the Toronto Graduate School of Theological Studies and Emmanuel College (1953).

Peter's M.Th. thesis gives clearest evidence of his early exposure to Anabaptism. The topic was, "The Ban in the Writings and Life of Menno Simons."³⁵ The "Acknowledgment" singles out two individuals who had been particularly helpful: Cornelius Krahn and Harold S. Bender. About Bender, Peters states, "... the writer is indebted [to Bender] for his sympathetic interest and counsel. His experience and friendship have been invaluable assets."³⁶ The first footnote in the text itself is a reference to Bender's biography of Conrad Grebel.³⁷ Peters' account of the origins and character of Swiss Anabaptism relies heavily on Bender's work. Much of this was repeated in the introductory section of his Th. D. dissertation.³⁸

In essence Peters probably always remained committed to the Anabaptist vision and regarded Mennonite Brethren as anchored in that vision, although he was sometimes ambivalent, even critical, about the interpretations and expressions of that vision in segments of the Mennonite community.³⁹ His strongest affirmations of the Anabaptist vision came in the period prior to 1975. In a 1959

article in *Mennonite Life*, Peters stated unequivocally that the Mennonite Brethren Church was a return to Anabaptism:

It seems rather clear that the Mennonite Brethren revival was meant to be a return to the Anabaptist vision rather than a deviation from it. The desire to build a community of believers who had personally committed themselves to follow Jesus Christ, and who were willing to live a separated life of holiness, was certainly in keeping with what the Anabaptist forefathers felt was the New Testament pattern for a believers' church.⁴⁰

Peters' teaching at MBBC also reflected a deep commitment to Anabaptism. One of the texts for a course on ethics was Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*, and the content of this and other courses clearly emphasized the principles of brotherhood, discipleship and love and nonresistance. Perhaps because J.A. Toews taught most Mennonite history and theology courses at MBBC, Peters could not move into this area to the extent that he would have liked to.

Peters became well known not only in the Mennonite Brethren constituency but also among other Mennonites and in the evangelical community. He was president of Tabor College from 1954-56, faculty member at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College (1957-65), moderator of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (1966-69) and moderator of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (1975-77). He also served as pastor of several Mennonite Brethren congregations and as president of Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo (1968-78). During the latter part of his life he seemed to feel more comfortable among evangelicals than among other Mennonites.

Other MB Leaders and Institutions

Among later generations of MB leaders and educators there were a number who were influenced by the Anabaptist vision and disseminated it, sometimes revising aspects of it. Of particular importance has been the influence of John H. Redekop, who often wrote brief articles for the *Canadian Mennonite* and later for the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* and other religious periodicals. The articles that bear on the issue are too numerous to cite and no doubt there was some change over the period from the 1950s to the present. The most detailed examination of MB identity is presented in his book, *Ethnicity and the Mennonite Brethren: A People Apart*.⁴¹

Redekop cites Walter Klaassen when he lists the eight essentials of Anabaptism rather than relying on a definition that arises out of the earlier Goshen school of Anabaptism.⁴² Mennonite Brethren, he affirms, are Anabaptist in theology. But he soon resorts to the use of the term "evangelical Anabaptism" without explanation.⁴³ Only toward the end of the book when Redekop makes a proposal for naming the Canadian MBs the "Canadian Conference of Evangelical

Anabaptist Churches” does he explain his use of the term “evangelical.”⁴⁴ At that point it becomes clear that Redekop is closer to Bender than to Klaassen, and that Anabaptism is really understood as a radicalized form of modern Protestant evangelicalism. The point at which the departure from Bender and the Goshen school as well as from Toews is most evident is on the issue of political participation. In this respect Redekop reflects both his Russian Mennonite heritage as well as the unique Canadian context, which has allowed Canadian Mennonites to become involved in and influence the political process.

Other individuals who have had varying degrees of influence on the Canadian MB scene in terms of promoting Anabaptism include Vern Ratzlaff, Harry Loewen,⁴⁵ Wally Unger, Henry Krahn and Abe Dueck,⁴⁶ all of whom studied and/or taught for periods of time at MBBC. Initially (in the 1960s and 1970s), the Anabaptist vision was essentially defined in terms of the Goshen school⁴⁷ and only gradually did that change as new scholarship emerged. The *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, particularly under the editorship of Harold Jantz from 1964 to 1985, was generally very sympathetic to promoting the Anabaptist vision.

Canadian MBs also played a very significant role in what Paul Toews refers to as “a reclamation of Mennonite history and identity” for US MBs.⁴⁸ In the mid-1960s, when Pacific Bible Institute in Fresno was transformed into a liberal arts college, young faculty recruits like Peter Klassen and John H. Redekop helped to give the school a more Anabaptist orientation. Beginning about the same time the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, under the leadership of individuals like John B. Toews and Abe J. Klassen, was refashioned from a fundamentalist to an Anabaptist institution and in the 1970s became a joint US-Canadian institution.⁴⁹ Klassen, a Canadian, had been a student of Bender, was one of the editors of the *Mennonite Bibliography 1631-1961*, and was Academic Dean of MBBS from 1968 to 1974. The majority of faculty members in subsequent years were Canadians, many of whom were grads of MBBC, who identified themselves with evangelical Anabaptism.

The strong affirmation of Anabaptism, particularly by Canadian MBs, is clearly evident in the first publication of the new Board of Christian Literature, *The Church in Mission* (1967), edited by A.J. Klassen. Subsequent publication efforts on MB history and theology demonstrate similar commitments by Canadians.

The Conference of Mennonites in Canada

A study of the prominent leaders and institutions of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada does not reveal a similar passion for the Anabaptist vision and for evangelical Anabaptism as has been the case for MBs. To be sure, commitments to Anabaptism were stronger than for the GCs in the US, but leaders and institutions were usually more ambiguous in their commitment to

the Anabaptist vision than Canadian MBs. The alternative to the Anabaptist vision, however, was not usually dispensationalist fundamentalism or other forms of North American evangelicalism. Rather the alternative was a different understanding of Mennonite peoplehood.

The roots of the Dutch-Russian groups that eventually constituted the Conference of Mennonites in Canada⁵⁰ were much more strongly anchored in the migrations of the 1870s than was true for the Canadian MBs. Two major educational institutions were established, the Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna, Manitoba (1889), and the German-English Academy in Rosthern, Saskatchewan (1905). Neither school was officially sponsored by the denomination, although the Bergthaler and Rosenorter were the primary founders and supporters of the respective schools. They were really teacher training institutions which, according to Frank Epp, were inspired by the American educational assumptions and fostered a strong German-English biculturalism. They drew their strong leaders from Kansas.⁵¹

In the 1940s and 1950s the MCI was essentially working with an understood sense of what Mennonite peoplehood was all about, although not articulated as clearly and concisely as Bender's Anabaptist vision. The essence of this understanding was very similar to that which had been defined at Bethel College in Newton, Kansas. This built on the tradition of Mennonite historiography begun by Cornelius H. Wedel around 1900 and continued by C. Henry Smith and Cornelius Krahn. Rodney Sawatsky has argued that this represented an "alternative Anabaptism."⁵² It had less emphasis on dogma, was less separatistic and more individualistic. Sawatsky even refers to a "pluralist vision."⁵³ The details of that alternative will not be explored here, but it is essential to recognize that it in fact represented a fairly distinct alternative.

Various Canadian Mennonite leaders have noted the importance of the Bethel Mennonite historians in the formation of their own view of Mennonite peoplehood.⁵⁴ One of the teachers at MCI was Paul J. Schaefer, whose interpretation of Menno Simons and early Anabaptism was different from Bender's and more in line with the Bethel historians.⁵⁵ Many of the individuals who were initially exposed to this reading of Mennonite history, later were also exposed to Bender's vision. Sometimes this led to a "conversion," while at other times it resulted in a new formulation which went beyond each of the earlier alternatives. Walter Klaassen perhaps best represented the latter among CMC leaders, and his book entitled *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant*, is one of the earliest post-Bender formulations of a alternative which recognized more pluralism in early Anabaptism.⁵⁶ Klaassen's influence came primarily after he became a faculty member at the newly-founded Conrad Grebel College and was greater in Ontario than in the rest of Canada.

Canadian Mennonite Bible College

The Canadian Mennonite Bible College was the CMC institution established in Winnipeg in 1947 which paralleled the Mennonite Brethren Bible College. In contrast to the MCI in Gretna, this institution soon had prominent *Russlaender* Mennonites on its faculty. Several faculty members had previously attended MBBC (Poettcker, Schroeder), before proceeding to advanced theological studies. Among the Mennonite institutions in the US which they attended were Bethel College and the Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Chicago, later in Elkhart, Indiana, where a joint seminary of the two largest Mennonite groups eventually developed. This move of the GC seminary to Elkhart may have symbolized an embrace of the Anabaptist vision.⁵⁷ In any event, there was a considerable mix of influences on the CMBC faculty.

There is no doubt that Bender's Anabaptist vision had a considerable impact on CMBC and the training that was offered there. At least one faculty member took courses by Bender while a student at Elkhart,⁵⁸ and others were indirectly influenced during their attendance in the next decade (e.g., John Friesen, Gerald Gerbrandt). But even prior to that there is evidence of Bender's influence on CMBC faculty. One of the clearest indications can be found in the Th.D. thesis of Henry Poettcker, which dealt with the hermeneutics of Menno Simons.⁵⁹ Although the personal acknowledgements make no direct reference to Bender, the work itself gives abundant evidence of the impact of Bender's work. Poettcker began teaching at CMBC in 1954 and was president for many years.

Overall, however, the CMBC faculty had received many years of their education at Bethel and at Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Chicago prior to its move to Elkhart. Those who attended the seminary in Chicago included David Schroeder, Henry Poettcker and Waldemar Janzen. These were often quite conscious of the fact that Bender was offering a vision which was based on a distinctive reading of Anabaptist origins and they were, at times, quite sceptical. Somewhat revealing is a comment by Waldemar Janzen. At one point during his studies Janzen asked S.F. Pannabecker, "Can one be a Mennonite without being an Anabaptist?" The clear response was, "Yes."⁶⁰ Whether or not it was always focused as clearly, the general feeling was often very similar and there was much more ambiguity about the commitment to a particular understanding of Anabaptism among CMBC faculty than among most MBBC faculty. To some degree this was also reflected in the curriculum. It appears that a specific course on Anabaptist theology was never offered at CMBC, whereas at MBBC a course was consistently offered beginning in the late 1960s.

Other CMC Leaders and Institutions

The first person to attempt to write a comprehensive history of Mennonites in Canada was Frank H. Epp.⁶¹ Epp tried to capture the variety but still discover common elements which would allow the various strands to form a single

integrated narrative. The result formed an interesting contrast to the story of the Mennonite Brethren Church written by J.A. Toews and published only a year after the publication of Frank Epp's first volume. Although Epp's narrative was inclusive of the various Mennonite groups and sought not to alienate any, his more ecumenical approach in itself made him much more representative of the CMC or GC Mennonites than of the MBs or any other Mennonite group.

The introductory chapter, which deals with Anabaptist origins in Europe in the sixteenth century, gives a clear indication of Epp's understanding of the Anabaptist/Mennonite faith. It reveals a much greater concern about social, economic and political realities and their impact on religious developments. It is therefore much less ideologically and theologically focused than Bender's Anabaptist vision was. Epp refers to the atomization and fragmentation of the early Anabaptist movement.⁶² The early Anabaptist movement is not portrayed as a uniform movement. "There were even some Anabaptist nudists and polygamists," Epp states!⁶³ Some organizational and theological unity was eventually achieved under the leadership of individuals like Menno Simons, but the dominant impression is one of variety and division, even in later stages. Common experiences of persecution, migration, settlement, and community and institution building provide the threads to weave a common story.

Frank Epp's role and influence in Canadian Mennonitism went far beyond his role as historian. His first major task came when he was appointed the founding editor of the inter-Mennonite paper *The Canadian Mennonite*, which began in 1953. The paper did not have a very focused theological perspective and initially was concerned especially with bridging the cultural and linguistic gap between the Mennonite community and the North American environment. It tried to address the young people in particular and became a forum in which many of the aspiring young academics expressed their sometimes quite radical religious and political views. It is interesting to note, however, that Epp's editorials seldom directly addressed the issues raised by the Goshen school of Anabaptist historiography. While there was no explicit disavowal of the Anabaptist vision, the overwhelming impression is of a more ecumenical, less separatistic and more politically activist orientation. Epp's other publications and activities, such as his role in MCC Canada and his openness to political participation, likewise manifested a very different understanding of Anabaptist-Mennonitism.

Rodney Sawatsky, whose 1977 dissertation specifically dealt with Mennonite self-definition through history, is also a good example of a Dutch-Russian Mennonite in the CMC who has contributed much to a more pluralistic understanding of Mennonite identity.⁶⁴ His influence, however, has come primarily in the last fifteen years.

Conrad Grebel College, where Sawatsky served both as dean and president for periods of time, arrived on the Canadian Mennonite scene relatively late. It was clearly more pluralist in its orientation despite the fact that one of its two supporting bodies was (Old) Mennonite.⁶⁵ It seems probable that MBs would

have been more willing to cooperate in sponsoring the institution if the college had been perceived as more singularly committed to “evangelical” Anabaptism.

The Anabaptist Vision at the Congregational Level

The above analysis has dealt primarily with the Anabaptist vision at selected institutional and leadership levels. The role that institutions and leaders play in shaping the values, attitudes and behaviour of ordinary members in the congregations may at times depart considerably from that which is evident at the leadership level. It is probably also true that in terms of the MB and the CMC denominations in Canada, the role of leadership has been different. Key personalities, with somewhat “charismatic” personalities, have been more determinative for MBs than for CMCs, at least much of the period under consideration.

The church membership profiles of 1972 and 1989 provide one measure of the embrace of the Anabaptist vision at the congregational level. These profiles demonstrate some stark contrasts between the two denominations, MBs and GCs (CMCs), in their two national settings in the measurements of their performance on Anabaptist scales which were developed.⁶⁶ The following table gives a summary of the ratings of the four groups on the Anabaptist scale, as well as for United States and Canadian Mennonites as a whole.

Ratings on Anabaptist Scale
(Percent scoring Upper Middle or High)

	1972	1989
U.S. MBs	50.9	43.0
U.S. GCs	55.8	49.4
Can. MBs	80.8	69.1
Can. GCs (CMCs)	74.2	64.2
U.S. Menns.	53.6	46.7
Can. Menns.	78.8	67.0

The table reveals that, of the four groups, Canadian MBs scored highest on the Anabaptist scale and US MBs scored lowest. Both Canadian MBs and Canadian GCs scored higher than their US counterparts. It is clear, therefore, that the findings which concluded that MBs in NA were more Anabaptist than GCs in North America were heavily dependant on the high ratings of Canadian MBs on the scale.⁶⁷ In fact, Canadian MBs may have rated higher on the Anabaptist scale than any other Mennonite group, whereas US MBs probably had one of the lowest ratings of any of the groups analyzed.

Both MBs and CMCs declined sharply in the measurements on the Anabaptist scale by 1989. The reasons were many. In terms of the MBs, the College (MBBC) no longer played the central role in shaping attitudes of the constituency by 1989. Often there were sharp reactions against the personalities and concepts that were perceived as Anabaptist. Among CMCs other factors were probably more important. Some forms of evangelicalism no doubt eroded Anabaptist values in both constituencies.

Conclusions

Although the above analysis is far from comprehensive, it does give some indications of the uniquely Canadian responses to the Anabaptist vision and the differences between Canadian MBs and Canadian GCs. Canadian MBs appear to have been much more receptive to Bender's Anabaptist vision than their American counterparts and than the CMCs. There are many factors that have brought about these different responses. Canadian CMCs, while primarily of Dutch-Russian descent, were more mixed in terms of their background in the migrations of the 1870s and 1920s and thus had closer connections with the Bethel school of historians than MBs had with Tabor College or with alternative interpreters of Mennonite origins. Mennonite Brethren on both sides of the border probably felt the need to define themselves over against the GCs for historical reasons. In the US the choice was more often a definition which emphasized similarities with fundamentalists or evangelicals, whereas in Canada the affinity with (Old) Mennonites often became the preferred alternative. After all, the (Old) Mennonites were not the "fallen" church from which the MBs had separated, whereas the CMCs were regarded that way! MBs, because of their Baptist and Pietist connections, could appreciate the concept of "evangelical Anabaptism" more than CMC Mennonites could.⁶⁸ For Canadian MBs, to be "evangelical" allowed them to distinguish themselves from fundamentalism, and to be "Anabaptist" was a way of being Mennonite which distinguished them from the CMCs. It allowed them to affirm the best of their Mennonite heritage without denying the validity of their 1860 experience.

Notes

¹See particularly the volume of essays in *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by Calvin Redekop and Samuel Steiner (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1988). Numerous other essays have been published, some of which will be referred to below.

²James C. Juhnke, "Mennonite History and Self-Understanding: North America as Bipolar Mosaic," in *Mennonite Identity*, 83-99.

³Ibid., 93.

⁴Rodney J. Sawatsky, "Beyond the Social History of the Mennonites: A Response to James C. Juhnke," in *Mennonite Identity*, 101-108.

⁵Ibid., 107.

⁶See James Stayer, "The Easy Demise of the Normative Anabaptist Vision" in *Mennonite Identity*, 111.

⁷Paul Toews, "Differing Historical Imaginations and the Changing Identity of the Mennonite Brethren," in *Anabaptism Revisited: Essays on Anabaptist/Mennonite Studies in Honor of C.J. Dyck*, edited by Walter Klaassen (Waterloo, Scottdale: Herald Press, 1992), 155-172.

⁸See for example a recent essay by John H. Redekop, "A Perspective on Anabaptist Pacifism in Canada" in *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types*, edited by John R. Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 1991):60-68. See also the study by Leo Driedger, "Urbanization of Mennonites: Canadian and American Comparisons," *Mennonite Quarterly Review (MQR)* 56,3 (1982):269-290, and the comparisons in Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Waterloo, Scottdale: Herald Press, 1994).

⁹See my brief comments in "Canadian Mennonites and the Anabaptist Vision," *Mennonite Historian*, 19, 4 (December 1993), 2.

¹⁰For a detailed report of the proceedings, see David P. Reimer, *Experiences of the Mennonites of Canada during the Second World War, 1939-1945* (Altona, c.1947), 37-56.

¹¹See manuscript in the Personal Papers collection at the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies (CMBS) in Winnipeg.

¹²See tape collection at CMBS.

¹³Ibid. See also typed manuscript of part of address at CMBS.

¹⁴See Herbert and Maureen Klassen, *Ambassador to his People: C.F. Klassen and the Russian Mennonite Refugees* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Press, 1960), 93. The book cites many other instances of interaction between Klassen and Bender.

¹⁵B.B. Janz, Personal Papers, Box 3, File 32, CMBS.

¹⁶See my article, "Bestvater, William J.," in *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, V.

¹⁷See A.J. Klassen, ed. *The Bible School Story: Fifty Years of Mennonite Brethren Bible Schools in Canada* ((Yarrow, BC: Board of Education, Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1963).

¹⁸See my essay, "The Changing Role of Biblical/Theological Education in the Mennonite Brethren Church," in *The Bible and the Church: Essays in Honor of Dr. David Ewert*, ed. by A.J. Dueck, H.J. Giesbrecht and V.G. Shillington (Winnipeg, Hillsboro: Kindred Press, 1988), 131-148.

¹⁹See Benjamin B. Janz, "Grundzuege im Charakter der Glaubenstellung unserer Vaeter," Personal Papers, CMBS.

²⁰See David Ewert, *Stalwart for the Truth: The Life and Legacy of A.H. Unruh* (Winnipeg, MB: Board of Christian Literature, 1975). On one occasion Unruh is said to have inquired of one of his dispensationalist colleagues who had a detailed cloth chart, "Do you think God will proceed according to your rag?"

²¹See John B. Toews, *With Courage to Spare: The Life of B.B. Janz (1877-1964)* (Winnipeg, MB: The Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978), 73ff.

²²See J.A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers* (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches,

1975), 205f.

²³H.H. Janzen wrote a special section entitled "Chiliasm as accepted and taught in the Mennonite Brethren Church" in the ME article on "Chiliasm." He stated that chiliasm had been "unofficially" accepted by the entire MB Church and that very few individuals would oppose it.

²⁴*Anabaptists Four Centuries Later: A Profile of Five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Denominations* (Kitchener, Scottdale: Herald Press, 1975) and John B. Toews, Abram G. Konrad, Alvin Dueck, eds., "Mennonite Brethren Church Membership Profile 1972-1982," *Direction* 14,2(Fall 1985).

²⁵See Elfrieda Toews Nafziger, *A Man of his Word: A Biography of John A. Toews* (Winnipeg, MB: Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1992). See also Abe Dueck, Herbert Giesbrecht and Allen Guenther, eds., *People of the Way: Selected Essays and Addresses by John A. Toews* (Winnipeg, MB: Historical Committee, Board of Higher Education, 1981).

²⁶Toews Nafziger, *A Man of his Word*, 26.

²⁷J.A. Toews, "The Anabaptist Concept of the Church," (Bachelor of Divinity thesis, Faculty of Theology, United College, Winnipeg, 1950).

²⁸Toews Nafziger, *A Man of His Word*, 59.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 112f.

³⁰Dueck, Giesbrecht, Guenther, *People of the Way*, 167.

³¹Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, 5.

³²*Ibid.*, 12.

³³*Ibid.*, 13.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 361ff.

³⁵Frank C. Peters, "The Ban in the Writings and Life of Menno Simons," (Toronto Graduate School of Theological Studies and Emmanuel College, 1953).

³⁶*Ibid.*, "Acknowledgement."

³⁷*Ibid.*, 6.

³⁸F.C. Peters, "The Coming of the Mennonite Brethren to the United States and their Efforts in Education," (Th.D. diss., Central Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, KS, 1957).

³⁹In one address at MBBC (ca. 1983?) the writer remembers that Peters compared the MB theological heritage to his family heritage--he had long been aware of his indebtedness to his father's side (Anabaptism), whereas only recently had he begun to appreciate his mother's heritage (the evangelical side).

⁴⁰Frank C. Peters, "The Early Mennonite Brethren: Baptist or Anabaptist?" *Mennonite Life*, October 1959, 176-178.

⁴¹John H. Redekop, *Ethnicity and the Mennonite Brethren: A People Apart* (Winnipeg, Hillsboro: Kindred Press, 1987).

⁴²*Ibid.*, 13f.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 15

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 160-63.

⁴⁵Harry Loewen's first book was entitled, *Luther and the Radicals: Another Look at Some Aspects of the Struggle between Luther and the Radical Reformers* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1974). Loewen's book showed more differentiation among the various types of Anabaptists.

⁴⁶I attended Goshen Biblical Seminary 1964-66 and received the B.D. degree in 1966. At MBBC I taught most of the Mennonite History and Anabaptist theology courses in the 1970s and 1980s.

⁴⁷Texts for these courses often included Guy F. Hershberger, ed., *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to Harold S. Bender* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957), and Robert Friedmann's *Theology of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1973).

⁴⁸"Differing Historical Imaginations," 165.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 165ff.

⁵⁰This refers essentially to the Berghaler of Manitoba and Alberta whose membership ca. 1920 was 2022, compared to 1553 for the Mennonite Brethren, according to Frank Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Toronto, ON: Macmillan of Canada, 1982), 20. Although the difference in membership may not appear so significant, the MBs had only begun in 1888 and did not have any strong institutions.

⁵¹Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People* (Toronto, ON: Macmillan of Canada, 1974), 336-37.

⁵²Rodney J. Sawatsky, *Authority and Identity: The Dynamics of the General Conference Mennonite Church* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1987). See especially pp. 38-56.

⁵³Rodney J. Sawatsky, "The One and the Many: The Recovery of Mennonite Pluralism," in *Anabaptism Revisited*, 144.

⁵⁴Adolf Ens was a student at MCI in 1949 and noted this in his response to a questionnaire which I sent to various Canadian Mennonite leaders. Walter Klaassen, who was a student at Rosthern and later at Bethel College, also noted this in an interview.

⁵⁵See Paul J. Schaefer, *Woher? Wohin? Mennoniten! Lektionen fuer den Unterricht in der Mennonitengeschichte* (Altona, MB: Rhineland Agricultural Society, 1942) and *Woher? Wohin? Mennoniten! I. Teil. Die Vorgeschichte der Mennoniten: Die Mennoniten in Holland und Preussen* (Altona, MB: Mennonitischen Historischen Verein, 1952).

⁵⁶Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo, ON: Conrad Press, 1973). Klaassen states, for example, that "Considerable differences . . . existed between the various groups in interpretation, theology and church practice" (p. 2).

⁵⁷This was suggested recently by Paul Toews at the "Whither the Anabaptist Vision?" conference in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania.

⁵⁸Adolf Ens was a student in the last class in Mennonite history that Bender taught. Helmut Harder and Peter Fast were also students at Elkhart during the Bender years.

⁵⁹Henry Poettcker, "The Hermeneutics of Menno Simons: An Investigation of the Principles of Interpretation which Menno Brought to the Study of the Scriptures" (Th. D. dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1961).

⁶⁰Response to questionnaire sent to selected leaders.

⁶¹Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People and Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival*.

⁶²See e.g. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920*, 39.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 33.

⁶⁴The first major contribution by Rodney Sawatsky was his dissertation entitled, "History and Ideology: American Mennonite Identity Definition Through History" (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1977).

⁶⁵Werner Packull, one of the faculty members, was a writer together with James Stayer and Klaus Depperman of the article entitled, "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 49 (1975), 83-121.

⁶⁶The published tables in Kauffman and Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later* and J. Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedger, *The Mennonite Mosaic: Identity and Modernization* (Waterloo, Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1991) do not give this information. Some comparisons

between Canadian and US MBs can be made on the basis of the "Mennonite Brethren Church Membership Profile, 1972-1982." I would like to thank Howard Kauffman for providing tables which enable new comparisons to be made. The published sources tend to have a denominational bias which obscures the very significant differences between US and Canadian MBs. They also have a geographical bias which favors the US, particularly when the regional comparisons between east and west make the Mississippi the dividing line. For MBs and for Canadians such a division again obscures more significant regional divisions. In Canada, particularly for MBs, Manitoba and British Columbia are not part of the same region. See also Driedger and Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking*, for other related implications of the denominational and geographical biases. The section on "theological brokers" (pp. 99ff), for example, does not include any reference to John A. Toews, despite his remarkable influence on MBs.

⁶⁷See Kauffman and Harder, *Anabaptism Four Centuries Later*, 114ff.

⁶⁸It is interesting to note that MBs have been very active in the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, including those who have identified strongly with Anabaptism. John Redekop and F.C. Peters, for example, members of the General Council and Redekop was the chairman of the Social Action Commission. The Canadian Conference of Mennonites, on the other hand, has been reluctant to join the EFC. See John H. Redekop, "The Involvement of Canadian Mennonites with non-Mennonite National Religious Bodies," in Abe J. Dueck, ed., *Canadian Mennonites and the Challenge of Nationalism* (Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1994), 111-127.