One Photograph, Many Stories: A Mennonite Congregation's Diverse Response to War

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Four friends link arms for a photograph in 1941. They are: Donald Millar, a Mennonite conscientious objector (CO), Gordon Eby, a United Church member, his fellow recruit Bob Rahn, a Lutheran who would be killed overseas, and Doug Millar, brother to Donald, also a Mennonite CO.

One photograph, many stories. I came across this snapshot while working on a history of Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church in Kitchener, Ontario.[1] Although not all of these boys were members at Stirling (as the church was popularly known), they might have been. Stirling's stance during the war was to ask its young men to choose conscientious objection. But if they did not, the congregation's response was to link arms, so to speak, maintaining ties as much as possible with the boys who entered military service. This image is a symbolic portrait of Stirling's response to the war.

To understand the nature of this response, it is necessary to take a look at the congregation's origins Stirling was formed in 1924 as the result of a split with First Mennonite Church in Kitchener. The

immediate cause of this split was the silencing of three First Mennonite Church preachers, including Urias (U.K.) Weber, for refusing to preach the Ontario Mennonite Conference's stance on bonnets for women. But this incident was the result of a larger, protracted struggle around issues of nonconformity, fundamentalism, and the increasing involvement of Mennonites in urban life.[2]

Having begun life together out of conflict, the young Stirling congregation sought to minimize future strife. "Unity in essentials, liberty in nonessentials," was the guiding principle. The structure of the new church was unusual for a Swiss Mennonite congregation of its day. U.K. Weber became an elected and salaried pastor. A church council was created, not to lead the congregation, but to reflect its collective decisions. Because of its recent experience, this was a church extremely sensitive to the embodiment of authority in any one leader.

While the church worked to breathe life into these new structures, it faced the tension of being an independent Mennonite congregation. It struggled to resource its pulpit with Mennonite pastors, who were strongly advised by their conferences not to accept invitations to speak at Stirling. Though the lure of other denominations was sometimes strong, the congregation reaffirmed Mennonite hallmarks such as an ethic of service, peace convictions and modesty of dress (though, not the bonnet, of course).

An incident in 1937 illustrates these tensions. A strike at Kitchener's Kaufman Rubber Company involved Stirling members both on the factory floor and in the boardroom. The pastor's brother, Irvine Weber, was Kaufman's general manger. Plant owner A.R. Kaufman, although not a Mennonite, had taken an interest in the congregation, which extended to gifts of money and materials. A.R. Kaufman bitterly opposed the union, and was determined to break the strike.

When the strike ended with no gains for the workers, Stirling's church board was asked – we don't know by whom – to deal with four Stirling members who had taken an active role. After speaking with the men, the deacon reported that the workers "considered themselves within their rights, having perhaps been more or less misrepresented by newspaper reports." The board decided to take no direct action, but rather to extend forgiveness to the workers, while at the same time expressing disapproval of their actions.[3]

We can see here the tensions that existed in this congregation: an urban church with both management and working class members, fostering the remnants of the traditional Mennonite distrust of unions, reluctant to practice the traditional forms of church discipline, able to express its disapproval, but unwilling to take an authoritative stance.

In the years leading up to World War II, Stirling developed a reputation as a kind of refuge or last resort in the Ontario Mennonite

community. One example of this is the story of the Millar family. Fred Millar, (father of Doug and Donald, pictured above), joined the military in World War I. In 1917, just before going overseas, Fred married Ida Bergey, a young Mennonite woman who was out of communion with her local congregation because of a dress infraction. When Stirling formed in 1924, it created a place for Ida to rejoin a Mennonite congregation, and Fred to articulate his post-war pacifist convictions.[4]

Choices in War

After the outbreak of war in September 1939 a special meeting of Stirling's Young People's Society was called. The opening to the meeting included the singing of several hymns and a standing vote expressing loyalty to the government. The meeting discussed some theological and practical aspects of the choices facing the young people. They generally agreed that co-operation with other non-resistant churches was essential.[5] After lengthy discussion, the closest they came to a guideline was this statement:

> It was stressed that each person would have to make her or his own decision…but that such decisions should be made on a definite conviction based on Christian principles as found in Scripture.[6]

Stirling's young people did make their own decisions, and they were diverse ones. Although there are no firm numbers available, evidence suggests that a substantial percentage of young men became COs, another substantial number, including one woman, joined the armed forces, while a smaller number became noncombatants (firefighters or medics).[7] Since Stirling, as a city church, had fewer boys on farms, the agricultural exemption was less of an option. Two Stirling boys started out as COs but were so discouraged with what they thought of as pointless work that they left to join the air force.[8]

On the home front, the war was the catalyst for the largest effort Stirling has ever undertaken to involve its women, children and young people in service and mission projects. In a climate where any aspect of daily life could become a symbol of patriotism, Stirling members asked how they could participate in the general spirit of community sacrifice, but on Mennonite terms. The women joined other Mennonites in sewing for war relief. For children and youth, a "Stirling Crusaders" group was formed. The model for this group was the "Lord's Acre Movement," a Depression-era project of a North Carolina minister. Young people raised crops on donated land, with the proceeds

given over to mission and relief efforts. Youth and adults participated in the "Lord's hour" project by donating one hour's wages each week to the Crusader program. The Crusaders had their own banner, theme song, and church services. The program pervaded almost every aspect of church life.

Stirling appeared untroubled that the name, structure and rhetoric of the Crusaders appeared militaristic. Instead, it unashamedly appropriated military language, turning it on its head to strengthen the resolve to nonresistance.[9] The congregation expressed many times the sense that they lived in a "Christian nation" which deserved their loyalty. This language was used without the perceived conflicts that many Mennonites in the post-Vietnam War era would easily identify.

The early war years marked a transition from the leadership of U.K. Weber to that of a young American pastor named Andrew Shelly. One of Shelly's first tasks as Stirling's minister was the creation of a thirteen-page pamphlet articulating the moral, Biblical and personal reasons why a young person should choose conscientious objection. Although Shelly states his pacifist position forcefully, he also makes a point of articulating how to respond to those who make a different choice:

> Name calling accomplishes nothing….We must ever be careful to keep a kindly, Christian attitude toward those who enter the services of their country. We must not belittle their sacrifices. Millions have died on the battlefields of the world. Millions of mothers, wives and sweethearts have become grief-stricken…. The paramount question is: "What should I do?"….In the light of the fact of Christ's death on the Cross for your sins…that you are a steward before God…that we are living in a period of tremendous crisis…as a church we believe God's way for the Christian is that of the C.O. – you must decide what you will do![10]

Stirling had another influential voice for nonresistance in the person of Elven Shantz. Shantz worked tirelessly for the non-resistant cause, serving as secretary to the Military Problems Committee of the Conference of Historic Peace Churches (CHPC). Shantz was also a strong advocate for young men making their own choices. In fact, both his sons chose to enlist in the armed forces.[11]

Like many Mennonite churches, Stirling made a concerted effort to keep in touch with its young men in CO camps. It also endeavored to keep contact with those in military service. A passage from the Sunday School newsletter illustrates this balance:

> It is now some time since you were last with us… We have missed your presence, but I want to assure you that we are 'carrying on' as best we can during your absence… A considerable number of our boys are in our country's service; some in the armed services and others in alternate service. In the camps and even more especially in the armed services there are many opportunities to lower one's standards; many temptations to deny the Lord. Although this Canada of ours owes its greatness to the fact of its people's recognition of God as ruler over all, many ridicule Christ and His Church. May you ever keep before you those spiritual values and ideals you were taught …May you soon be enabled to be with us and take your regular place.[12]

The church's words and actions suggest that, regardless of their experiences, all of the boys would be welcomed back into the church at war's end. In fact, many in the armed forces did return. One young ambulance driver mimicked the experience of Fred Millar in the First War. Willie Erb was unwelcome at his Amish Mennonite congregation, but he and his new wife found a church home at Stirling.[13]

Two Stirling boys died overseas. One of them was Fred Shantz, the son of Elven and Mabel Shantz, who was shot down over Münster in March 1945. Stirling felt the Shantzs' sorrow keenly. Members still recall the crowded and emotional memorial service at which Andrew Shelly gave the sermon. He stated:

> Death always presents a challenge to those who live. We have the challenge to give ourselves to those things which will create a greater spirit of brotherhood in our world. Many lives were sacrificed in the last years. All of us ought to be challenged to do all in our power to release those forces which make for goodness and freedom for all mankind.[14]

The sermon made no reference to nonresistance, and much of it was a personal call to stronger Christian faith. Shelly did not seize this moment as a time to promote the strong nonresistant beliefs he had presented elsewhere. Rather, the sermon is a gentle, but nonetheless unmistakable, evangelistic call. Stirling embraced the Shantzes and the family of Harold Stevens, the other Stirling boy who died overseas, by placing flowers in the church on Remembrance Day for several years after the war. Stirling's organ, installed after the war, still bears a memorial plaque dedicated to Frederick Shantz.

Legacy of an Image

How are we to interpret this photograph? What is its legacy for the congregation? One possible interpretation would be that Stirling talked a good talk about nonresistance, but in the end, placed too much emphasis on personal decisions, and was too ready to embrace and affirm whatever decision their young people made; this interpretation concludes that the congregation should have taken a stronger, less "worldly" stand. Another possible interpretation is that Stirling exhibited tolerance of different views and decisions; although the church made it clear that it stood for nonresistance, it still extended the hand of fellowship despite disagreement, and in doing so, the congregation modeled Christian love in the face of disagreement.

It is the second interpretation that has prevailed at Stirling. In its oral and confessional history, Stirling members express pride in how the congregation embraced both COs and servicemen. Behind these stories is a message that strengthens Stirling's historical ideal of itself: a congregation of "unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials." This message was reaffirmed in 1969, when Stirling was reconciled with the Ontario Mennonite Conference. In the CO camps, Stirling's future leaders caught glimpses of the possibilities for inter-Mennonite cooperation. Working together with other churches in the 1950s and 60s on various projects paved the way for reconciliation with Conference.[15]

In the 1980s, Stirling created the Peace and Justice Centre, the first of its kind in Canada. A number of Mennonite congregations across the country have groups or committees that include a peace and justice focus as part of their work. Stirling, however, is the only congregation that has formally adopted and staffed a peace and justice centre as part of their mission to the congregation and broader community.[16] Linking arms with servicemen in the 1940s did not prevent, and may have aided, the development of a peace and justice orientation at Stirling by the 1980s. The following story illustrates this connection:

Many young people in Kitchener and the surrounding area during World War II will remember a series of ecumenical Sunday evening services for youth, called "Firesides." In the spring of 1991, seniors from various denominations decided to plan a "Fireside reunion." The reunion was expected to be a pleasant, uncontroversial evening of singing and reminiscences. Stirling was chosen for the venue, and the church was packed for the occasion. The speaker that night, a minister in the Evangelical Missionary church, spoke on the topic of "spiritual warfare." To illustrate his point that Christians can win victory over the evil in their lives, he quoted a U.S. General as saying that, in the recent Gulf War, God was on the side of the Americans and their allies.

The comment caused a ripple in the audience, and the meeting's chair, Doug Millar, felt he needed to respond to the speaker. Doug talked about being a conscientious objector during World War II and how he mourned the senseless loss of life both of innocent civilians and friends in the military who never returned. He expressed his belief that Christians were not called to go to war.[17] After the service, several COs told Doug that if he had not got up and said something, they would have. One participant recalled, "It was quite exciting and not at all what we had in mind for a Fireside Reunion."[18]

History is often "quite exciting, and not at all what we had in mind." One of the reasons this photograph made an impression on me personally is because my mother's family was among the Mennonite refugees fleeing the Soviet Union during World War II. The young enlisted men in the picture were, in indirect but nonetheless connected ways, going to drop bombs on my family, their German relatives and friends. This is one layer of complexity. Another is my childhood memory of Remembrance Day ceremonies in my loyal, rural Ontario public school, where I stood reverentially for the moment of silence out of respect for the soldiers who had died for a "king and country" that was not mine at the time.

As a university student, I had the chance to spend four months in Germany with Conrad Grebel College's PACS internship program and Mennonite Central Committee. A few weeks after returning home, I noticed a display in the Kitchener post office of stamps commemorating the patriotic work of Canadian farmers during World War II. While viewing the bucolic images of men and women harvesting grain, I could not help but feel a chill for my newly-made German friends, Mennonites among them, against whom all this effort had been expended.

How much of this compartmentalization of family history, Mennonite beliefs, and Canadian identity is a common experience? The process of studying this photograph and other dissonant images exposes these compartments and forces their contents to spill out together. This photograph is an image we might not have in mind when we think of the CO experience. It reminds us that within this experience, there are many stories left to uncover, many perspectives yet to be explored.

Notes

1 Significant portions of this paper are reproduced from: Laureen Harder, *Risk and Endurance: A History of Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church, Kitchener* (Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church, Kitchener, ON, 2003), with the permission of Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church.

2 Ibid, 48.

[3] Ibid, 77.
[4] Ibid, 57.
[5] "Young Peoples' Meeting re: WWII," XIII-2.15.1.8/2, Stirling Avenue Collection, Mennonite Archives of Ontario, Waterloo, ON (hereafter MAO).
[6] Ibid.
[7] "Members Serving Canada" (n.d.), Stirling Avenue Collection, MAO.
[8] Letter to Laureen Harder from Anne Millar, October 11, 2006. In possession of author.
[9] Harder, *Risk and Endurance*, 111; For a discussion of militaristic language appropriated by Mennonites see Marlene Epp, "Heroes or Yellow-bellies? Masculinity and the Conscientious Objector" *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (17) 1999: 107-117.
[10] "Thinking things through 'about being a C.O,'"A. R. Shelly [n.d.], Stirling Avenue Collection, MAO.
[11] Harder, *Risk and* Endurance, 105.
[12] "Newsletter," October 1942, XIII.2.15.3/1, Stirling Avenue Collection, MAO.
[13] Letter to Laureen Harder from Anne Millar, October 11, 2006.
[14] "Memorial Service," XIII.2.15.3/1, Stirling Avenue Col*lect*ion, MAO.
[15] Harder, *Risk and Endurance*, 102.
[16] Esther Epp-Thiessen, MCC Canada, Peace Ministries Program in conversation with John Harder, August 26, 2005.
[17] Lorna Bergey, "Nostalgia and Tension at Fireside Revisited," *Mennonite Reporter*, May 27 (1991), 12.
[18] Letter to Laureen Harder from Anne Millar, May 9, 2000. In possession of author.