

# A Symposium on Faith and Ethnicity Among the Mennonite Brethren: Summary and Findings Statement

On November 19–21, 1987, the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies and Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary of Fresno, California, sponsored a symposium on faith and ethnicity among Mennonite Brethren. The following summary statement was drafted by the Symposium Planning and Findings Committee whose members are listed at the end of the Summary. (Ed.)

What does it mean to be part of a particular people in a pluralist world? What does it mean to remain faithful to a spiritual tradition in a world of change? How does one value specific ethno-religious communities in a multi-ethnic society? How powerful are the assimilating forces in a “melting pot” North American society? How does a Christian balance the value of a unique tradition with the imperative to proclaim a universal gospel? These were among the questions that approximately 125 people gathered to discuss in Fresno, California, on November 19–21, 1987, at a symposium entitled “Faith and Ethnicity Among the Brethren,” sponsored by the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies and Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary.

The impetus for the symposium came largely from the publication of John H. Redekop's *A People Apart: Ethnicity and the Mennonite Brethren* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1987), a book that has generated significant discussion and controversy throughout the Mennonite Brethren world, particularly in Canada. Symposium participants agreed that Redekop is to be commended for bringing this issue to the forefront. Specific points he has raised in his book and those that have arisen in subsequent discussions have long needed serious consideration. The symposium provided an opportunity for scholars from several disciplines to examine in greater detail the issues raised in Redekop's book and to suggest points on which further discussion is necessary.

In his symposium presentation, Redekop expressed concern that the dual (religious and cultural) meaning of the word "Mennonite" has created confusion regarding Mennonite Brethren identity and has weakened the conference's witness to the larger world. There is nothing wrong with individuals within the Mennonite Brethren emphasizing and celebrating their Mennonite cultural identity, Redekop stressed, so long as it does not become intertwined with the religious aspects of Mennonitism. He pointed out, however, that the ethnic features of Mennonitism dominate the public's understanding of the movement. Redekop suggested that a necessary element in the elimination of this confusion is for the Mennonite Brethren to change their name — preferably to the "Evangelical Anabaptist Church" — though he noted that without an accompanying change in attitudes and behavior by ethnic Mennonite Brethren, a name change would accomplish little. Redekop stated that despite criticism to the contrary, the crucial issue of *A People Apart* was the recovery among Mennonite Brethren of "Biblical Anabaptism," and not ethnicity *per se* or the question of a conference name change. He did emphasize, however, that he sees the three issues as linked.

In addition to statements of agreement and affirmation, numerous questions were raised by symposium participants regarding Redekop's thesis, use of data and conclusions. One observer noted that Redekop links the Mennonite Brethren theological crisis to a problem of ethnicity, which is in turn linked to a call for a change of name. It is not clear that these linkages can be proven and may rather be "leaps of faith" on Redekop's part. The statistics cited by Redekop, some argued, do not necessarily prove his positions, and can be interpreted in ways that lead to very different conclusions. Others pointed out that the name "Mennonite" does not carry the exclusively ethnic connotations that Redekop sees, but is also recognized as an important theological tradition. To abandon the name is to give up that positive identity. Some participants noted that Redekop's use of the terms "ethnicity" and "ethnocentrism" occasionally overlap, thereby blurring the distinction between a healthy sense of identity and a sinful misuse of that identity.

### Social Science Perspective

Questions of ethnicity have long been studied by scholars within the social sciences, and these perspectives were given considerable attention during the symposium. Robert Enns, professor of Sociology at Fresno Pacific College and Al Dueck, associate professor of Pastoral Counseling at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, used statistical analysis of the 1982 "Church Member Profile" to explore the similarities and differences between "Family" (ethnic) and "Choice" (non-ethnic) Mennonite Brethren in the United States, Canada and Japan. The overriding conclusion of this presentation was that there is a surprisingly small difference in action and attitude between North American Mennonite Brethren who were raised in

that church ("Family" members) and those who joined later in life ("Choice" members). Differences can be distinguished, but they are not as great as might have been assumed. Family members are more likely to agree with Anabaptist beliefs, score lower on measures of religious privatism, and are more ethically conservative than their Choice counterparts. Most striking, however, was the conclusion that Family Mennonite Brethren are on the whole less involved in congregational leadership and feel less a part of their congregation than do Choice members. This active involvement of Choice members and the absence of measurable ethnic discrimination in congregational life suggests that the Mennonite Brethren have done rather well at integrating new people into both the social and theological life of the church. The responses of Japanese Mennonite Brethren indicate a selective acceptance of traditional Anabaptist-Mennonite distinctives.

Miriam Warner, assistant professor of Anthropology at San Jose State University, addressed the social and psychological motivations for ethnic persistence within the Mennonite Brethren Conference. In contrast to Redekop, Warner pointed out that ethnic and religious identity are complementary; Mennonite Brethren peoplehood is a synthesis of both identities. She criticized Mennonite scholars for indiscriminately moving between theological and social science categories in their examination of Mennonite ethnicity and thereby clouding the issue. The problem is compounded because Mennonite Brethren scholars have exhibited "a hesitancy to analyze ethnicity with the same intensity as is applied to religion."

Warner noted that Mennonite Brethren ethnicity has persisted because of several social and psychological factors. Social factors include a history of Mennonite persecution and exclusion, beginning in the sixteenth century but also recurring after 1860 among Mennonite Brethren in Russia. These circumstances drove Mennonite Brethren into separate communities on the margins of society. Cultural and language differences in North America encouraged Mennonite Brethren to continue their separate existence. Socialization mechanisms perpetuate a sense of Mennonite Brethren identity today, whether through the family, church or church-related institutions such as schools.

Psychological factors also sustain Mennonite Brethren ethnic persistence. Ethnicity allows for the "psychological placement" of individuals, and helps to identify them as either belonging to the group or existing outside of it. Warner also detects an ambivalence toward urban life as another motivation for emphasizing ethnicity. When faced with the pluralism of the city, Mennonite Brethren find comfort in the clear identity structures of ethnicity that recall an earlier, more unified existence. The most important psychological factor, however, is what Warner calls a Mennonite Brethren "crisis of confidence." This situation dates back to the beginning of the Mennonite Brethren movement and the persecution and ostracism that accompanied their break with the Mennoite church in Russia. In the face of such hostility, Mennonite Brethren developed feelings of inferiority to their

Mennonite neighbors. Migration to North America only perpetuated these feelings *vis a vis* the larger society. The less Mennonite Brethren interacted with American culture, the more threatening the possibility became. This crisis of confidence has caused Mennonite Brethren to handle their ethnicity in one of two ways: either they attempt to hide it or they over-emphasize it out of a need for psychological security. Rather than engage in efforts to erase their ethnicity or change their name, Warner suggested that Mennonite Brethren need to develop a "quiet, secure sense" of who they are. Such an attitude would attract outsiders rather than repel them, "for people are attracted to a group with confidence in their identity."

### Biblical Viewpoints

From the social sciences, the participants turned their attention to biblical perspectives. Leading this discussion were the four biblical scholars from the seminary: Elmer Martens and Allen Guenther addressed the Old Testament viewpoint; Tim Geddert and John E. Toews spoke of the New Testament context.

Elmer Martens pointed out that the people of God have struggled throughout history to achieve a balance between the particular and the universal. This was true of Israel just as it is true for Mennonite Brethren. The Old Testament reveals that Israel placed a premium on ethnic purity, as evidenced by its discouragement of interracial marriage. It was not a closed culture, however, and did allow for outsiders to join. The Old Testament, according to Martens, calls for a celebration of ethnicity, which has often served as the vehicle of God's message. Ethnicity is only a problem when it becomes identified with the faith message.

Allen Guenther addressed the more specific issue of assimilation in Old Testament Israel. Were Gentile converts to Judaism welcomed on an equal footing with ethnic Jews? Not entirely, says Guenther. Such converts continued to be "foreigners," and as a rule experienced social and economic discrimination. While this was the reality, Guenther noted that a different ideal is frequently mentioned in the Old Testament: the faithful remnant, a minority devoted to Yahweh that transcends ethnic and cultural ties. Guenther sees the existence of two such remnants in the biblical text, one Jewish and one Gentile. These two remnants were to come together at some future point. In the gathering of these remnants ethnic divisions will cease to be an issue.

Tim Geddert spoke of Jesus' views on ethnicity and faith. "At the heart of Jesus' mission," stated Geddert, "is a focused attempt to break down ethnocentrism." Jesus did this by redefining the people of God in non-ethnic terms, preparing a faithful remnant to break through ethnic barriers, and laying the foundation for a multi-ethnic church. Since Mennonite Brethren have embraced Jesus' message, they must take seriously his example on ethnic relations. For Geddert this does not require a name change. Rather it

calls the conference to welcome persons of all backgrounds into its congregations and church structures and thereby become a truly multi-ethnic church.

John E. Toews addressed the issue of Paul and ethnicity. The center of Paul's message, said Toews, is that God's Messiah has come in Jesus of Nazareth. Faith in this Messiah is the essential mark of belonging to the people of God. Questions of ethnicity often arose within Paul's historical context. Must Gentiles become Jews to be Christians? What happens to Jews who don't believe in the Messiah? Toews showed that Paul considered it inappropriate for Gentile Christians to first become Jews. Salvation is by God's saving work through Christ, not through participation in a particular culture. Ethnicity, however, is a legitimate function of history and is appropriate so long as it is not imposed on others. With regard to non-Christian Jews, Toews noted that God remains faithful to his people despite their unbelief. Jewish ethnicity is valid but is not the basis of God's end-time kingdom. Christianity is not the destruction of Judaism but the fulfillment of it.

### Missiological Questions

Given these biblical perspectives, how does the church carry its message to the world around it? Fran Hiebert, a student at Fuller Theological Seminary and member of the Mennonite Brethren Board of Missions and Services, suggested that the strong Mennonite Brethren emphasis on foreign missions may have in part been a symptom of its inability to address the tension between faith and culture. Mennonite Brethren could freely evangelize in other cultures without fear that these converts would come in contact with their rigid ethnic boundaries. Such isolation was more difficult when evangelism took place in the local setting, and it was thus easier to emphasize foreign missions at the expense of home missions. Hiebert also believes that Mennonite Brethren may have adopted a new escapism today, in the form of the "Homogeneous Unit Principle." This principle assumes that people want to join a church that closely resembles their own ethnic and class identity, and that it is therefore legitimate to develop separate churches along ethnic lines. This form of church planting, however, still fails to address God's call to build a universal church with ethnic inclusivism.

Paul Hiebert, professor of World Missions at Fuller Theological Seminary, pointed out that there are two approaches to evangelism among non-Teutonic people: the planting of separate churches, or opening church doors to others. The creation of separate ethnic congregations may be an appropriate interim stage, but this segregated arrangement is healthy only on a temporary basis and must at some point give way to full fellowship and assimilation. It is proper, said Hiebert, for Mennonite Brethren to affirm their ethnicity, and so long as ethnic identity is kept in proper context, it can enrich their life as a church. Hiebert suggested four ways for Mennonite Brethren to overcome their ethnic limitations: 1) an examination of deeply-

held attitudes toward other cultures; 2) participation in cultural immersion; 3) learning about other cultures; 4) the celebration of other forms of ethnicity.

### Theological Reflections

The symposium was concluded by reflections from two observers: Delbert Wiens, professor of Humanities at Fresno Pacific College, and James McClendon, professor of Theology at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California. Wiens helped participants understand Mennonite Brethren ethnicity first by describing what he called "traditional culture." In the world, Mennonite Brethren lived in isolated cultural enclaves with recognizable geographical boundaries. Religion and daily life were not separate in this culture; all of life within this enclave fell beneath a "sacred canopy."

Mennonite Brethren no longer live in such a world, but rather one of "structural pluralism." Their lives are made up of many spheres, each with its separate function and demands. The church is merely one sphere among many. Life has become secularized and a sense of wholeness has been lost. In such a situation, the family and church alone are forced to carry the sense of the unified community, which was once diffused across all of life. But the time available in those settings, particularly that of church, is too short for individuals to receive what they need from it. The church may be the carrier of a common memory, but there is no longer time to live out the realities of the memory on a day-to-day basis. It can only be evoked symbolically. For those who have the memory, this evocation has meaning by itself. But these meanings are not self-evident and others cannot enter into the experience on the basis of evocation alone.

Outsiders sense that Mennonite Brethren have something that is valuable — a sense of peoplehood and wholeness — and wish to join. They are welcomed, but the church can offer them nothing more than evoked memories. Thus they find little concrete which they can grasp, feel excluded and often leave. Such memories have become uncreative and worship of them idolatrous. This is the point at which ethnicity becomes damaging.

Mennonite Brethren must find a way to move beyond modernity, to relativize its effects on these lives. They need a larger canopy to cover the separated abstractions of their existence. Wiens suggested that one way to do this is to recapture and redefine a sense of "Mennoniteness." Mennonite Brethren must move beyond their tribalistic understanding of Mennonites and create a larger sense of peoplehood not directly linked to ethnicity. Wiens pointed to the various inter-Mennonite organizations currently in existence as a way to create such an expanded peoplehood, as a way to "sacramentalize the concrete."

James McClendon suggested a slightly different source of enlarged peoplehood to be recaptured: a sense of Anabaptist or "baptist" theology.

McClendon stressed that this tradition's unique understanding of scripture and its emphasis on "conversion baptism" distinguishes it from other theological traditions and provides a focus for identity. A group that allows its theology to die is left with only the skeleton of its ethnicity, said McClendon, citing New England Puritanism as an example of this phenomenon. This could happen to the Mennonite Brethren as well if they do not regain a sense of their own distinctive theological identity.

### Issues for Further Discernment

Points of agreement and uncertainty emerged during the symposium, suggesting the need for further reflection and conversation. These issues fall into three broad categories: 1) questions of faith and culture, 2) social science perspectives, and 3) the name change discussion.

#### 1) Faith and Culture

A. Mennonite Brethren ethnicity in its proper perspective is not necessarily a problem. Indeed, it has played a significant positive role in providing cohesion and strength, in maintaining the gospel message within a specific peoplehood and in carrying it to others. Mennonite Brethren may be thankful for this strong sense of peoplehood.

B. At the same time, Mennonite Brethren ethnicity has been exclusive at many places and times. For this ethnocentrism repentance is in order. Care must be taken to keep ethnicity in its proper perspective.

C. Multi-ethnicity is very different from non-ethnicity. The people of God have always been multi-ethnic. Traditional Dutch-Prussian-Russian ethnicity need not be eliminated in Mennonite Brethren churches. It must only be placed on an equal footing with other forms of ethnicity.

D. Non-ethnicity is not possible. Faithfulness is always within a particular cultural context. Affirmation of the contextualization of the Gospel in other cultural settings is possible only if we are confident in our own faithfulness within our particular cultural setting.

E. Persons who share a common commitment to Christ experience a new unity which transcends, but does not negate, ethnic particularity. The universal body of Christ is a commonwealth of peoples, not only an association of homogenous individuals.

F. Given the above perspectives, how is evangelism carried out in a multi-ethnic context? Mennonite Brethren are currently intrigued by ethnic evangelism among other groups while decrying their own ethnicity. It is not clear what models of evangelism should be followed.

G. Further study of faith and culture from the biblical perspective is needed. The symposium presentations were important starting points in this regard, but more detailed study is necessary.

#### 2) Social Science Perspectives

A. Greater precision is needed in the use of terminology and categories when examining ethnicity. Lack of understanding and disagreement fre-

quently arise simply because of failure to understand each other's use of key concepts. It is important to distinguish more clearly, for example, between "ethnicity" and "ethnocentrism." At what point does a healthy recognition and celebration of cultural distinctives become an unhealthy exclusion of outsiders?

B. What is the appropriate use of statistical data when examining questions of this sort? How is a consensus reached when the same data can be interpreted in several ways?

C. The use of questionnaires and surveys is one valuable way to determine the role of ethnicity among the Mennonite Brethren, but such a methodology contains weaknesses. It focuses attention on very general patterns that are shared by aggregates of individuals "on the average," and considerable particular information is thereby obscured. Questionnaires reveal only "minimal" and individualistic responses. The focus on individuals in this methodology ignores the role and importance of structures. Mennonites need to develop an appropriate research methodology that is less individualistic, rationalistic and static; more corporate, active and dynamic.

D. Studies of Mennonite ethnicity have focused mostly on current members, thereby ignoring those who have left the church. A study of this latter group might suggest different conclusions.

E. Most of the presentations and responses during the symposium assumed a pluralistic model for understanding ethnicity. It can also be suggested, however, that Mennonite Brethren are not so much preserving their distinctive culture as they are assimilating to another form of ethnicity, that of North American middle-class culture. This larger ethnicity is more subtle and less easily recognized but it is just as real as earlier ethnicities. This assimilation may actually have more to do with current Mennonite Brethren theological and ethical drift than does ethnic particularity.

### **3) Name Change Discussion**

A. The issue of a Canadian Conference name change has international impact and the Canadian Conference should bear this in mind when discussing the matter. Counsel from the General Conference and Mennonite Brethren leaders in other countries should be gained before making a unilateral decision.

B. While the Mennonite Brethren name has become at least partially linked to ethnic particularity, it also carries considerable theological currency with other religious traditions.

C. The subsequent records of other Mennonite groups who have dropped that designation from their names indicate a steady erosion of Anabaptist theological values rather than a recovery of them.

D. Given the potential for conflict, misunderstanding and controversy generated by dropping the word "Mennonite" from the conference name, there is real doubt that the accrued benefits will outweigh the disadvantages.



## Conclusion

Though the symposium focused primarily on questions of ethnicity, larger issues also emerged. The Mennonite Brethren Conference is in a state not only of ethnic pluralism, but of theological pluralism as well. Given this reality, what is the central issue facing the Mennonite Brethren conference today? Ethnic particularity and pluralism? Theological unity and pluralism? Assimilation to mainstream North American culture? A collective lack of self-confidence? Further study must also be given to understand how these various issues relate to one another. Is ethnic particularity the cause of our theological drift, as some would suggest? Has a cultural crisis of confidence and the resultant call for cultural assimilation also caused Mennonite Brethren to reject their theological distinctives? The symposium did not provide final answers for these questions, but it did lay groundwork for continued informed discussion.

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December 1987