Discovering the Mennonite Brethren

FAMILY MATTERS

DRAFT

Introduction

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

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

This is the confession of Mennonite Brethren. The church as family most clearly defines our identity. While we may protest that this ideal is not a reality in many MB congregations, the purpose of this book is not simply to report what is. It is a call to remember what has been and to return to what should be and will be.

The church is our primary home. As Anabaptists, we begin reading the Bible, not with the creation account in the first chapter of Genesis, but with the story of Jesus in the Gospels. There we see that Jesus claims that his primary family relationship is with those who do God's will, who live out the reign of God: "Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35).

Jesus' notion of family grew out of his Hebrew understanding of covenant. At its core, the covenant was a family relationship. God promised Abram a family that would become a nation. Marriage and family were the essence of Israel's

identity and purpose. But it was not until the exodus from Egypt that Israel became a nation, a mature covenant community. As Exodus 12:38 tells us, the covenant nation was "a mixed multitude" (KJV), not a blood kinship set apart from its neighbours ethnically. Although Israel had ties to biological family, at its core, Israel was a people of God because of God's historical acts. By insisting on a family based on ethics not ethnicity, Jesus was consistent with the covenant God made with Israel in the Hebrew Bible.

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

Jesus gives identity particularly to those who are marginalized, to those who have no family. In the Old Testament, God explicitly includes marginal people like orphans, widows and foreigners in the covenant people. In the new covenant, Jesus announces good news for the poor, the lame, the blind, the prisoner. The family of God is composed of "the last, the least, the lost, and the little" (Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*). Biological connections do not determine or define the family of God.

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

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

Perhaps no application of the metaphor is more central to the Mennonite Brethren story, however, than the notion of strangers and aliens. As mentioned above, the Hebrew Bible gives privileged place to aliens or foreigners. The historical and theological basis for this special status is the origin of Israel itself. Israel began

as a nation of strangers. Outsiders. Because they were aliens in Egypt, Israel is called to provide for strangers (Leviticus 19:33-34; Exodus 23:9; Deuteronomy 10:17-19). Jesus himself was a homeless person with no place to "lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). Repeatedly, the New Testament calls Christians to welcome strangers into their homes. Christians practise hospitality.

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

Immediately upon the MB church's birth in Russia, there awoke the desire to welcome strangers into the family, whether these be the Slavic people in the area or people in the mission field of India or Congo. Ironically, our story also reveals that, like the New Testament church, we have often resisted or moved too slowly in including new ethnicities within our congregations. Nevertheless, this exciting interplay of being family, being strangers on a pilgrimage, and welcoming new family members has characterized the Mennonite Brethren church throughout its history.

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

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

Above all, welcome!

Chapter 1
The Anabaptist Reformation

Early Church

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

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

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

Chapter 1

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

Constantine and Catholicism

By 320 C.E., the church had become so popular that the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, making the church not only legal but protected. In 367 C.E., Bishop Athanasius issued a list of 27 early Christian writings authorized for reading in churches; they were deemed useful for teaching, discernment and theological construction. These books, together with the books of the Hebrew Bible, would eventually become known as the Christian Bible. This "canon" or measuring rod proved useful for determining the shape of emerging Christian orthodoxy as various and conflicting teachings tried to move Christianity one way or another.

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

Despite the church's commitment to pass along traditions of the Christian faith, creedalism often replaced spiritual vigour. The family of Christ became an institution vying for power and prestige. Abuses of religious power grew increasingly menacing during the Middle Ages. The powerful state church gained enormous wealth by selling indulgences (absolution of sin) and by demanding payment to release loved ones from purgatory. Pilgrimages and crusades to the Holy Land produced strife in the name of the Prince of Peace. The Mass was often distorted from a celebration of Christ's victory to a ritual aimed at gaining God's favour. The relics of saints were promoted as conveying supernatural power. Money-hungry, immoral church leaders lived like kings instead of serving the King of kings. The church was losing her vitality.

Protestant Reformation

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

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

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

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

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

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

Radical Reformation

Through his visionary ministry, Zwingli attracted a group of young radicals who wanted even more thoroughgoing reform of church life. Conrad Grebel – a

bright but rebellious son of high society whose decadent life had been transformed through new birth in Christ – and his colleague Felix Manz broke with Zwingli on the issue of baptism. Following the counsel of civil authorities, Zwingli had continued the practice of infant baptism. Grebel, insisting that the state had nothing to do with church practice, argued for believers baptism.

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

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

The Brethren, as they called themselves, witnessed to their faith with joy and great courage. Grebel's evangelistic preaching brought hundreds of converts to know the Lord. Grebel was frequently imprisoned and his health failed; he died of the plague in the summer of 1526.

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

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

1. Only believers who give evidence of transformed lives shall be baptized.
2. Those who return to a life of sin and refuse to return to faithful discipleship are to be banned from the church.
3. Believers must be united in faith and believers baptism before taking the Lord's Supper.
4. Christians must live a holy life separated from the surrounding sinful society. The congregation is served by pastors who preach the Word, preside at the Lord's Supper and provide pastoral oversight to the members.
5. Christians take the attitude of the suffering Christ and renounce force, violence and warfare.

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

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

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

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

> *My dear son, I hope now to go before you; follow me as much as you value your soul. I now commend you to the Lord. Love one another all your days; take little Hans on your arm now and then for me. If your father should be taken from you, care for one another. The Lord keep you one and all. My dear children, kiss one another once for me, for remembrance. Adieu, my dear children, adieu.*

Menno Simons

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

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

The first was in 1525, during his first year as priest when Menno began having

doubts about the dogma of transubstantiation. As he was celebrating the mass, a doubt struck him: are the bread and wine actually miraculously changed into the flesh and blood of Christ? In his struggle with this question, Menno did something that would radically change his life. He began a thorough search of the New Testament. He discovered that the Scriptures did not support many of the Catholic understandings he had been teaching. Menno was forced to make a choice: was his authority the church or the Bible?

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

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

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

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

The group desperately needed a strong leader. Many had joined the Anabaptist revolutionaries and been slaughtered in war. Some had fled persecution, abandoning

the church. The remaining evangelical faithful were discouraged, scattered and dwindling. Menno gave himself to the role of overseer of the congregations in Holland (1536-43), northwest Germany (1543-46), and Holstein under Danish rule (1546-61). In 1536, Menno married Gertrude, a godly woman who bore him several children, but he maintained no permanent residence. He travelled to visit the scattered brothers and sisters, preaching, baptizing, evangelizing, building up the church.

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

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

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

For Menno, Christianity involved both faith and obedience. The Christian was called to live in the way of Christ. Menno's writings focus a clear vision of twin biblical ideals: practical holiness and the free church. The way of Christ involves Christ-like love and nonresistance, bold evangelistic witness in word and deed, and a complete separation from the sin of the worldly social order. While sometimes criticized for harsh disciplinary judgments (e.g., the ban), Menno was convinced of the necessity of the church as the redeemed community, consisting of brothers and sisters living in holiness.

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

Chapter 2
Birth of the "Brethren"

Migration to Poland

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

The area came under Prussian rule in 1772. The pressure of Prussian militarism under Frederick the Great made it increasingly difficult for the nonresistant Mennonites. Mennonites' refusal to pay taxes to support the state church and the military establishment, together with government restrictions on the purchase of more land for their growing families, forced them to look for a new home.

Mennonite Colonies in Russia

Many Prussian Mennonites saw the land settlement policy announced in 1763 by Catherine the Great of Russia as providential. Russia was looking for industrious settlers for new territories acquired north of the Black Sea. Mennonites and other German immigrants were promised freedom of faith, land

ownership, self-government and nonparticipation in the military. Starting in 1788, the Mennonites established German-speaking colonies of small villages with farmlands, church buildings, schools and homes. The early years on the Ukrainian steppes were difficult, but the industrious Mennonites eventually established themselves and by 1860 were a population of 30,000.

Ironically, by the mid-1800s, the Russian Mennonite church had taken on many of the characteristics of the European state church of the 1500s. Church membership was a prerequisite for civic privileges such as voting, land ownership and marriage. To those who completed a catechism class, the church extended baptism without insisting on a personal commitment to Jesus Christ. Church elders began to act as civic authorities. Many elders showed no evidence of discipleship themselves. Church discipline, pastoral counselling and mutual care were often neglected. Divisions between wealthy members and the impoverished landless class deepened. Public drunkenness, gambling and moral decadence went undisciplined. The ordinances of the Lord's Supper and baptism took on a sacramental character, a sense that the rite itself replaced a need for disciplined Christian living. The Russian Mennonites faced social, economic, intellectual and spiritual stagnation. They were in need of renewal.

Revival Movements

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

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

In the 1840s and 1850s, another revival emerged, centred in the village of Gnadenfeld. The members of this "Brotherhood" movement had been influenced by Lutheran Pietists in Prussia and had migrated to the southern Ukraine in 1835 to escape pressure from the Prussian government. The Gnadenfeld church promoted community and private Bible study and prayer, as well as the temperance movement. Most of the early Mennonite Brethren came out of this congregation.

The greatest catalyst for renewal among Russian Mennonites in the mid-nineteenth century was a Lutheran Pietist pastor, Eduard Wuest. After a personal conversion experience, he developed into a powerful preacher. Gifted with a commanding physique, melodious voice and attractive personality, Wuest was

frequently a guest speaker in the Gnadenfeld church. He preached a message of true repentance and God's free grace and called for personal commitment to "Jesus Christ, the Crucified." Many who were weary of lifeless formalism were drawn by his message into a vibrant spiritual relationship with God and each other.

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

Birth of the Mennonite Brethren

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

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

Second, church meetings were held to decide how to discipline the renegade revivalists. It appeared that reconciliation would be possible. Unfortunately, a few unsympathetic opponents attacked the leaders of the house Bible study movement at a meeting, shouting, "Out with them; they are not better than the rest!" More shouts followed. About 10 revivalist "brothers" walked out of the church meeting. In all, the Gnadenfeld church lost about 25 members to the house church reform movement.

On Epiphany, January 6, 1860, a group of brethren met in a home for a "brotherhood" meeting. This gathering proved to be the charter meeting of the Mennonite Brethren church. They formulated a letter of secession that explained their differences with the mother church. The letter affirmed their agreement with the teaching of Menno Simons and addressed abuses they saw in baptism, the Lord's Supper, church discipline, pastoral leadership and lifestyle. Essentially, they were concerned that the church accepted members and leaders who gave no evidence

of a redeemed and disciplined life as participants in the ordinances. Eighteen men signed the document. Within two weeks, an additional nine men signed the letter of secession. Since each signature stood for a household, the charter membership of the Mennonite Brethren church consisted of more than 50 people.

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

Reaction of the Mennonite Colony Administration

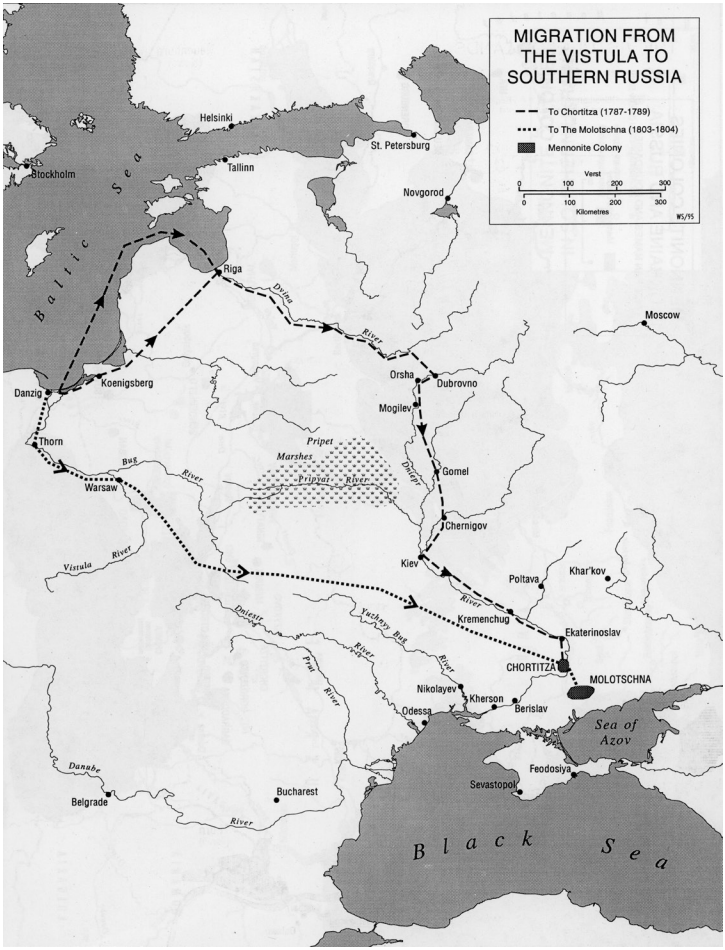
The Mennonite church and colony hierarchy reacted swiftly to the letter of secession. The church elders excommunicated the Mennonite Brethren and the colony administrative office prohibited further gatherings of the group, with violators subject to arrest and imprisonment. The colony also threatened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

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

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

Healthy emphases did, however, emerge with the birth of the new church. Mennonite Brethren taught the need for conversion based on the grace of God. Conversion involved repentance – a turning from sin to God. It was not simply a natural process involving learning the catechism. Baptism came to symbolize

death to the old life and resurrection into the body of Christ and a lifestyle of discipleship. Communion, which included footwashing, was held more frequently. The church sensed the call to boldly proclaim the good news in evangelism, loving action and mission.



Map reprinted from the *Mennonite Historical Atlas*, page 13. Used by permission of Springfield Publishers.

Chapter 3
The MB Church Grows

Early Challenges (1860-65)

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

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

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

The expression of personal spiritual experience became increasingly

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

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

The First Migration to North America

The Mennonite Brethren church in Russia grew rapidly. By 1872, twelve years after its founding, the Mennonite Brethren church numbered about 600 members. Representatives met for the first MB church family gathering, a time of inspirational meetings and planning for evangelistic church extension. A committee was elected to supervise the work of evangelism, and five men were appointed to itinerant evangelistic ministry.

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

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

limited educational opportunities.

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

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

The Russian Revolution and Later Migrations

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

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

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

beyond it, with the first MB mission field established in India.

Revolution, World Wars and Migrations

The prosperous golden age of the Russian Mennonite colonies was shattered by the events of the First World War (1914-18) and the Russian Revolution (1917-18). Because their culture identified them with the German military foe, Mennonites experienced hostile treatment from the Russians. When German troops gained control of Ukraine for a time, the Mennonites divided on the issue of nonresistance, with some forming armed units of self-defence. Later, it was recognized that this was not only a tactical blunder but a violation of their historic biblical nonresistance. The Mennonites of Russia were caught in the events of the civil war that followed, as well as the terrors of bandit attacks. They experienced the ravages of malnutrition, disease epidemics and famine from 1920 to 1922. Relief assistance by European and American Mennonites, who organized to form the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), finally arrived in March 1922, saving thousands from starvation.

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

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

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

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

Chapter 4
People of the Word

Mennonite Brethren have always been "people of the Word." Study of the Bible sparked the renewal movement that birthed the MB church. Envisioning those earliest days of Mennonite Brethren life, various scenes come to mind.

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

Next, one sees two MB ministers meeting in the fields as they go about their farming. A controversial question is troubling the young church. How will they find direction? The two ministers lean against a fence post and reach into bulging coat pockets to retrieve their New Testaments. There are no WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) bracelets on their wrists, but both assume that the practical solution to a real problem will be found in this book. What Jesus teaches through his life and the Sermon on the Mount is the starting point for their search for direction.

Later, we see Bible conferences. Here dynamic preachers expound the Scriptures. High excitement is evidenced by standing-room-only attendance. Tents are erected to

contain overflow crowds. The Bible conferences are popular, not only in the Russian colonies, but in the Mennonite Brethren congregations of North America.

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

These scenes from the past continue to be replayed in contemporary settings in the Mennonite Brethren church. Commitment to studying and obeying the Word of God is at the core of who we are.

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

Evangelical Pietist Influences

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

Several influences are evident in the Mennonite Brethren use of Scripture. The Mennonite Brethren have been particularly open to outside theological influences. Perhaps this is due to the circumstances of their birth. The relatively closed Mennonite society of mid-century Russia was opening to a larger world of technology, education, literature and religious ideas. This opening coupled with an intense desire for a deeper experience of God marked early MB experience. Among the movements that have affected MB interpretation are sixteenth-century Anabaptism, nineteenth-century European Pietism and mainstream evangelicalism (including fundamentalism, Baptist theology and charismatic movements). More than most other Anabaptist-Mennonite groups, the Mennonite Brethren have been influenced by conservative Christian sources. This openness

has both strengthened faithful discipleship, and threatened it.

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

In their book, *Only the Sword of the Spirit* (1997), Jacob Loewen and Wesley Prieb summarize the positive themes for which Mennonite Brethren are indebted to the Pietist movement. They include personal and small group Bible study; the call for a conscious and personal decision to accept salvation; a deeply-felt encounter with God; warm Christian fellowship; an emphasis on grace, Christ's return, personal evangelism and Christian unity; and a personal sense of God's call to congregational leadership.

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

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

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

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

The Anabaptist Interpretation of Scripture

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

The early Anabaptists practised a "focused canon," in contrast to a "flat canon" (Loewen and Priebe).

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

Mennonite Brethren follow the focused canon approach. This practice does not relegate parts of the Bible to secondary status; rather, it reveals the unity of the biblical message. Christ is at the heart of this message. Nothing in the canon is ignored in the interpretive process, but the meaning of all parts is understood through the life of Jesus.

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

Community hermeneutics was important in the early days of the Anabaptist reformation and in the birth of the MB church. It was the issue that caused the Anabaptists to split with the reformer Ulrich Zwingli in the Swiss reformation

of the early sixteenth century. Zwingli allowed civil authorities to limit the church's practice of, and understanding of, the New Testament. The Anabaptists insisted that the community of faith should read the Bible together, then put its understanding of the Bible into practice.

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

MB Principles of Interpretation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

hermeneutics calls for faithful practice, not simply true doctrine. The test of a biblical people is their lifestyle.

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

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

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

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

Second, Jesus calls his followers to peacemaking. When we confess our sins, we have peace with God. That inner peace motivates us to pursue peaceful relationships with those around us, beginning with our families, our communities and even extending to our enemies. We see this as a vital part of Christian discipleship.

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

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

Chapter 5
The New Testament Church

Life as a Family

My teenage son is intrigued by his family tree. While he has traced his ancestry to the eighteenth century, his interest is a limited one. He is more curious about ancestors than second cousins. Other family members will need to pick up that angle of our family lines.

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

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

Growing the Family

The New Testament teaches that good family life is essential for a healthy relationship with the Father. Just as babies are nurtured best when they are born into a family, so evangelism and conversion are family affairs spiritually. Our

Confession of Faith (Article 7, "Mission of the Church") points to twin truths regarding evangelism. First, evangelism is the responsibility of every believer: "The Holy Spirit empowers every Christian to witness to God's salvation." Second, evangelism is a function of our life as a family. "The church as a body witnesses to God's reign in the world. By its life as a redeemed and separated community the church reveals God's saving purposes to the world."

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

The sixteenth-century Anabaptist church, as we saw earlier, was keenly evangelistic. The nineteenth-century Russian Mennonite awakening which produced the MB church was evangelistic in character. The contemporary MB church continues to make evangelism a focus. Healthy MB congregations continue to plan local outreach through friendship evangelism, special events, children and youth programs and ministries to people in need in their circles of influence. As a larger family, Mennonite Brethren plant churches in North America and around the world.

Redemptive Discipline

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

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

Since the 1860s, the MB church has struggled to find balance in the practice of church discipline. Church records show that conference proceedings often dealt with questions of ethical practice. In the early years, the conference prohibited things such as carrying life insurance, joking and jesting among members, attending circuses and theatres, viewing television and permitting women to worship without proper head covering. Many issues of earlier times appear legalistic to contemporary observers, but they demonstrate the seriousness with which Mennonite Brethren have taken the call to holiness.

The MB church continues to hold expectations about behaviour that fits

a follower of Christ. Our Confession of Faith (Article 12) forbids the swearing of oaths (Matthew 5:33-38; cf. James 5:12), participation in secret societies and behaviours "which threaten to compromise Christian integrity." While rules such as these may seem to border on legalism, they also serve as a reminder that the believer is not to conform to the world.

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

Baptism and the Lord's Supper

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

Baptism

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

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

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

former enemies, into one body.

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

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

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

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

Second, baptism marks a clear break from the past. In regions where Christians are persecuted, it is baptism that defines the change of commitment. Some Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Mormons have accepted the fact that someone prayed a "Jesus-in-my-heart" prayer, yet have ostracized, perhaps even persecuted, someone for being baptized into the community of Christ's followers.

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

Historically, for Anabaptists, this biblical understanding was very costly. Following the Roman Catholic lead, mainline Reformation churches baptized infants to wash away original sin and to bring them within the covenant community. Anabaptists agreed that baptism was the rite of incorporation into the covenant community. But they disagreed that the faith of the parents or the church

was sufficient for the event to have meaning. Instead, the Anabaptists taught that each member needed to make a public confession of faith in Jesus to be saved and to join the community of the redeemed. As we have seen in chapter 1, this view of baptism led to bloody persecution.

The nineteenth-century Mennonite Brethren reformers insisted on a return to believers baptism. Even though the Mennonite church in the colonies did not baptize infants, citizenship was restricted to baptized church members. Catechisms were recited from memory and personal commitment to Christ was neglected.

The birth of the MB church forced the community to develop its own baptismal practices. How would the new church practice believers baptism? The issue of eligibility was of first and foremost concern. They concluded that baptism is for "those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and commit themselves to follow Christ,…for those who understand its meaning, are able to be accountable to Christ and the church, and voluntarily request it..." (Article 8).

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

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

Another question for the emerging MB church was that of baptismal mode. Mennonite Brethren settled on immersion. The Krimmer Mennonite Brethren branch had the distinction of baptizing forwards (usually in running water). Today MB churches are free to immerse in water that best suits the purpose of the event. Some congregations use baptisteries; others find lakes or rivers; some employ tanks, tubs or swimming pools. Most congregations follow baptism with formal reception of the newly baptized members into the church and with the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is the second ordinance or sign practised by the Mennonite Brethren church. Like baptism, the Lord's Supper is understood to be a covenant

event. If baptism is the sign of entry into the covenant community, the Lord's Supper is the sign of unity with the body of Christ.

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

In Russia in 1860, the celebration of the Lord's Supper outside a church building was an act of defiance that eventually led participants toward separation from the Mennonite church and the founding of the Mennonite Brethren. The Mennonite Brethren held that the Lord's Supper was an event reserved for faithful disciples and should not be celebrated with those who rejected a godly lifestyle. Further, they requested communion in their homes in order to celebrate more frequently, more intimately and in a context of greater faithfulness.

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

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

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

The question of who should be allowed to participate in communion has often been controversial. Are only baptized believers eligible? Only those baptized as Mennonite Brethren? Do Mennonite Brethren hold to "closed" or "open" communion?

In the 1980s and 1990s, many MB congregations began offering communion to anyone who confessed Jesus as Saviour. The new openness reflected an interest in including believers who had not yet formalized their membership, believers who had been baptized as infants but were unwilling to be rebaptized and children too young for baptism. Recognizing the practice of the church, the Confession

of Faith speaks of extending participation in the Lord's Supper to "all those who understand its meaning, confess Jesus Christ as Lord in word and life, are accountable to their congregation and are living in right relationship with God and others" (Article 9). Our confession also acknowledges that the typical New Testament pattern was that baptism preceded participation in the Lord's Supper.

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

The MB church has no established directive regarding frequency of communion. Practice generally varies from quarterly to monthly commemoration. Mennonite Brethren have shied away from weekly participation lest the event become superficial and hurried. Also, the private celebration of the Lord's Supper by bridal couples to symbolize the marriage union is inconsistent with communion's meaning as a uniquely church event.

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

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

Living as a Family

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

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

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

Congregational Polity

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

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

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

Chapter 6
Peacemaking

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

A more recent story of meeting violent threats with the good news of Jesus took place in Kinshasa, Congo. Pakisa Tshimika met Bertrand in church one morning in 1997. Bertrand had recently escaped from his homeland, the Central African Republic, where he had been unjustly imprisoned for contesting election fraud. The military government in Congo plotted to kidnap Bertrand and return him to his country for execution. When Pakisa became aware of the plot, he and his family decided to provide Bertrand safe haven in their home, knowing that if Bertrand were found, they would also be incriminated. One day, the presidential secret service showed up at Pakisa's house, threatening violence. Pakisa invited the agent, armed with a machine gun, into his house for tea. Pakisa shared the message of Jesus' love with the agent but refused to release Bertrand. Pakisa asked the agent to inform the people who sent him that they would have to kill Pakisa

first before they could have Bertrand. Agents came to the house every day for weeks to threaten Pakisa and his family. Pakisa responded with loving hospitality. Finally, God opened the door for Bertrand to escape to a friendly West African country.

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

Jesus calls us to join the peacemaker family. He opens his State of the Kingdom address (the Sermon on the Mount) with the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12). In the Beatitudes, Jesus blesses peacemakers. By calling them "children of God," Jesus is announcing that peacemakers are particularly like God. He then offers a series of case studies to illustrate how he came to fulfill the law through a "greater righteousness." The six contrasting statements show how Jesus transforms a legalistic interpretation of the Law into the active righteousness of peacemaking (Matthew 5:17-48).

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

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

Active peacemaking is underscored in the sixth contrasting statement (Matthew 5:43-48). Jesus overturns the conventional principle "love your neighbours but hate your enemies" by challenging us to love even our enemies. Jesus is describing an evangelistic strategy. Pray for your persecutors, Jesus says, reminding us that the Beatitudes are tied closely to the contrasting statements that follow. Peacemaking seeks to fulfill Christ's mission for the church, to fulfill our

Lord's command to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20). Followers of Christ try to turn enemies into friends. This lifestyle is risky, demanding and sacrificial, but it is the way of Christ.

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

The New Testament letters describe members of the believing community as ministers of reconciliation. They serve their enemies (Romans 12:20; 13:8-10), return good for evil (Romans 12:17, 21; 1 Peter 3:9), pursue peace with all people (Romans 12:18; 1 Peter 3:11) and follow the example of the one who refused to retaliate (1 Peter 2:21-25). It is only by living within the community of peace that members are empowered by the Lord and Spirit of the community to fulfill their ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:11-21).

Third Millennium Peacemakers

The MB Confession of Faith emphasizes the positive and active quality of peacemaking. We confess that "believers seek to be agents of reconciliation in all relationships.... Alleviating suffering, reducing strife and promoting justice are ways of demonstrating Christ's love" (Article 13). Our confession calls us to obey Jesus' command to do good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27-28). Mennonite Brethren apply Christ's teachings on peacemaking in many contexts.

Peacemaking begins at home. The church is to take the lead in bringing peace to homes and families, to be an advocate on behalf of victims of spousal and child abuse, to foster reconciliation by teaching families to resolve conflict without violence.

Mennonite Brethren oppose violence against vulnerable members of the human race. In Article 14, we confess that "the unborn, disabled, poor, aging and dying are particularly vulnerable to...injustices. Christ calls [us] to care for the defenceless."

Mennonite Brethren are not immune to church conflict. The church is called to be a community of peace where the healthy exchange of differences brings reconciliation. MB churches have at times established covenants to guide their communication. These covenants encourage the practice of honest, loving exchanges and renounce gossip.

MB churches are faithful to Christ by showing leadership in helping to resolve neighbourhood disputes, racial tensions and animosity between victims of crimes

and their offenders. Many Mennonite Brethren work in mediation services to bring people together for restitution and reconciliation. We encourage prison visitation programs as well as rehabilitation and re-entry of prisoners into society.

Active peacemaking is also the aim of several inter-Mennonite agencies in which Mennonite Brethren participate. MCC fosters peace in North America and around the world through peace education training, conflict resolution and mediation, trauma healing, inter-faith bridge building and advocacy. Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) works at peacemaking by serving communities that have faced natural disasters. The story of these agencies is told in chapter 12.

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

The early Anabaptists taught that "the use of the sword" was contrary to the teachings of Christ. They opposed the use of force by the state to enforce particular Christian beliefs.

The Anabaptists recognized that nations had a legitimate duty to use the sword for police action. Menno Simons witnessed the tragedy of the Peasant Revolt in which early radical reformers were crushed after seeking to defend an independent state; that event helped convince him to lead the Dutch Anabaptists in the way of Christ.

Mennonite Brethren in Russia also struggled with the issue of "the sword." In the terror-filled chaos following the 1917 revolution, Russian Mennonites organized a self-defence force. There were heavy losses. According to historian John A. Toews, subsequent church conferences condemned the action "not only a tactical blunder, but also a gross violation of historic biblical nonresistance. It must always be regarded as a dark blot on the pages of Mennonite history" (Toews, 108-9).

Today the Canadian MB Confession of Faith addresses the issue of military involvement as follows: "In times of national conscription or war, we believe we are called to give alternative service where possible." Mennonite Brethren are grateful to God that governing authorities in North America have provided alternative service for those who choose not to enter military service. The MB church is called "to counsel youth to offer themselves in loving service to reduce strife and alleviate suffering rather than take up arms in military conflict" (Confession of Faith Commentary and Pastoral Application, 150-51).

Mennonite Brethren have come to this conviction because we believe Jesus' call to love the enemy requires that we make peacemaking a way of life. Nonresistance is not an awkward accessory that we pull out in times of war. The power to return love

for hate comes from our new nature in Christ. The Spirit enables us to live faithfully by providing a supportive community of believers within the family of God.

Peacemaking includes a call to prayer. Followers of Jesus pray for their enemies (Matthew 5:44) and for government officials and those in authority (1 Timothy 2:2). They pray for bold proclamation of the good news of peace (Colossians 4:4). Prayer is part of the believer's spiritual armour, enabling us to take our stand in the great conflict with the principalities and powers of this evil world (Ephesians 6:10-18).

What about members of our congregations who disagree with this peace position? What about Mennonite Brethren who serve in police forces where lethal force is sometimes expected in the line of duty? These questions and others are raised in the pastoral commentary on Article 13 of the Confession of Faith. The response there upholds the notion that nonresistance is so central to our identity as Mennonite Brethren that our leaders must agree to teach the way of peace. We accept members who do not endorse some details of Article 13 if they are willing to join with an attitude of submissiveness and teachability.

Challenges to Active Peacemaking

Two objections might be raised to peacemaking as God's way for God's family. First, doesn't the Old Testament teach that God endorses the use of violence by nation-states? Second, can anyone point to modem examples of this type of radical peacemaking, even on a small scale?

Objection 1: Old Testament War and Peace

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

First, as Mennonite Brethren, we begin with Jesus, not the Old Testament. We understand that Jesus speaks the clearest word from God and we interpret the rest of Scripture in light of what he said and did. Jesus clearly calls us to love our enemies. There is no hint that the ethic of Jesus changes for citizens of warring nations. For Jesus, our primary citizenship is in the kingdom of heaven.

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

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

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

This review suggests some of the ways Mennonite Brethren have responded to the objection that the Old Testament seems to approve war. It is noteworthy that the just war theory, a primary Christian alternative to nonresistance, is based on New Testament peace teachings rather than reference to Old Testament war stories. This just war theory seeks to limit violence by protecting noncombatants. Just war theory is a strategy of last resort, deemed necessary as the lesser of two evils in a fallen world. The MB strategy of peacemaking calls for Christians to reject all forms of war. Instead, we trust God to provide a means to restrain evil and to protect the innocent.

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

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

Mennonite Brethren have always been grateful for the freedoms we've received in the nations where we have lived as pilgrims and strangers (1 Peter 2:11). True nonresistance, however, depends on God, not guns, for protection. In the spirit of the three Hebrew youths who refused to worship the image of the empire in Daniel 3, we confess that "the God we serve is able to deliver us,…but even if he does not,…we will not serve your gods or worship the image." Faithfulness is a higher value than freedom. Obedience to God ranks higher than human life itself.

So, our ethics are not determined by how well they work. We do not practise peacemaking because it makes us successful. On the other hand, reports abound of how peacemaking produces good results. Allow one story from the American Revolutionary War to suffice.

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

enemy," replied Miller. "In that case," replied Washington, "I issue a pardon on the condition that Wittman is charged to your care." Miller and Wittman returned home, no longer as enemies but as friends.

Church and State

Closely related to the question of peacemaking is the issue of the Christian's relationship to the state. As noted above, Mennonite Brethren have been grateful to God for governments that have allowed them freedom of conscience. At the same time, in Article 12 of the Confession of Faith, we confess that our primary citizenship and allegiance belong to Christ's kingdom, not the state or society.

We see the government as part of God's plan to give order to society. God has instituted government structures ("principalities and powers" of Ephesians 6:12; Romans 13:1-5) to reward good and restrict evil. To the extent that government promotes well-being and maintains law and order, it is acting within its God-given mandate. When governmental demands contradict God's will, our responsibility as Christians is to "obey God rather than human beings" (Acts 5:29).

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

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

God calls us to have a broader vision for our corporate witness. In an increasingly diverse society, we are challenged to witness against racism, sexism and classism. We are called to share power within the denominational structures with other ethnic groups (whose membership is growing among Mennonite Brethren). We are challenged to respond compassionately to immigrant brothers and sisters, keeping in mind that as spiritual "foreigners" in this world, we are to show hospitality to strangers (Deuteronomy 24:17-18; Matthew 25:31-46; Hebrews 13:1-2). We are challenged to recognize and resist the idolatrous temptation to put our own economic security ahead of those experiencing overwhelming poverty in other parts of the world.

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