

MINISTERS OF RECONCILIATION: The Mennonite Church in American Race Relations, 1890-1963

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Abstract

In this paper, Shindel analyzes the attitudes and actions of Mennonites in response to American race relations between the years of Reconstruction and the early Civil Rights Movement, or 1890 to 1963. The paper provides an overview of Mennonite history and doctrine relative to American race dynamics, and examines the paradox between Mennonites' doctrinal commitment to pacifism and reconciliation, and the apparent unwillingness of many congregations to carry that doctrinal commitment out in practice. The evidence used to explain this argument is a collection of primary documents from meetings and conferences, as well as personal accounts from various Mennonite congregants and ministers.

American Mennonites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century faced an unprecedented cultural climate. With the Civil War, Emancipation, and Reconstruction came a new era of race relations in the United States. As a group of people historically devoted to pacifism and peacemaking, and by extension to reconciliation, Mennonites—like many other church and faith groups—were confronted with the necessity of forming an official and cohesive denominational response to what proved to be a tumultuous and volatile period of history.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, from the institution of the Black Codes to the subsequent Jim Crow laws, the publicized goal of the Mennonite Church administration was integration and tolerance. While the Mennonite Church as a whole publicly aimed for reconciliatory race relations, the situation in churches and in the lives of individual members did not always reflect this larger aim. This incongruity is evidence of a paradoxical tension between the traditional Mennonite theology of expansive and inclusive universalism and its practical community application, which proved to be largely closed and insular.

Who Are the Mennonites?

An Anabaptist sect founded by Menno Simons, the Mennonites first came about around 1525 in Zurich, Switzerland and began migrating from Europe to North America beginning in the seventeenth century. Numbers of rural American Mennonites began making their way toward cities in the early twentieth century after previously being a largely rural and voluntarily isolated people. Mennonite congregations began and grew across North America, at first maintaining a population of western European descendants. In 1896, however, the first black Mennonites were baptized and adopted into membership in Juniata County, Pennsylvania. From 1898 forward, the Mennonite church slowly but steadily increased the numbers of its black congregants.¹

Mennonite doctrine is built on the foundation of peacemaking. While initially their stance on infant and adult baptism separated them from other Protestant denominations (and labeled them “Anabaptists,” or “re-baptizers”²), today it is pacifism,

¹ Guy F. Hershberger, “Mennonites and the Current Race Issue: Observations, reflections, and recommendations following a visitation to southern Mennonite churches, July-August, 1963, with a review of historical background,” *Mennonite Church and Race Material Reports, 1955-1963* (Negro Evangelism Committee, 1995), accessed 8 November 2014, <http://replica.palni.edu/cdm/ref/collection/gopplow/id/5726>, 69.

² Palmer Becker, “What is an Anabaptist Christian?” *The Missio Dei Series* no. 18 (2008), accessed 8 December 2014,

peacemaking, and active nonviolence that set the Mennonites apart. Fundamental Mennonite theology parallels that of other Christian denominations; belief in a Triune God, in Jesus as the Son of God, and in salvation through forgiveness and faith are its core tenets. Today, Mennonites also adhere to a belief in the necessity of social justice and reconciliation, which has its roots in early writings of church founders.

In antebellum-era America, the Mennonites were still a relatively small group. They condemned slavery, refusing to engage in the practice altogether and persisting in paying any labor hired. In the years following Emancipation, however, this stance against slavery did not necessarily translate into ready acceptance of blacks into their congregations. Mennonites have generally been a private and exclusive group of people, in large part due to a history of persecution in their European countries of origin. Small membership numbers and close-knit, often ethnically homogenous, communities compound the tendency toward privacy. Even today there are sentiments of resentment of exclusion among new Mennonites, those who do not have a longstanding Mennonite ancestry, or those who do not fit the Mennonite ethnic mold. Many note the existence of a certain “Mennonite identity,” which has its origins in European Mennonite migrants whose descendants make up the majority of modern Mennonite congregations.

Mennonite polity has solved the problem of conceptualizing the missionary origins of non-Germanic, nonmigrating Mennonitism by referring to the Germanic Mennonites as *traditional* or *ethnic Mennonites*, while the rest are called *missionary churches*, *missionary Anabaptists*, or simply *nonethnic-Mennonites*. All of these terms are inadequate, but they do identify an obvious distinction which creates a very clear although muted line between the two groups.³

As a result in part of these long-held ideas of traditional “Mennonite identity,” many groups have been excluded, although perhaps not purposefully. Indeed, despite efforts to expand membership, “People of color still perceive the Mennonite identity as a

<http://www.mennonitemission.net/SiteCollectionDocuments/Tools%20for%20Mission/Missio%20Dei/DL.MissioDei18.E.pdf>, 1.

³ Calvin Redekop, *Mennonite Society*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 29.

constraint to their full inclusion in the Mennonite community.”⁴ This certainly held true during Reconstruction and the years that followed, and to an extent, remains true today.

Mennonites, Human Rights, and Early Race Relations

Menno Simons, the founder of the Mennonite Church and the man after whom it is named, wrote: “Dear sirs, seek God; fear God; serve God with all your might; do justice to widows, orphans, strangers, the sad, the oppressed; wash your hands of blood; rule your lands with wisdom and peace.”⁵ Doing justice to the oppressed has been a cornerstone of Mennonite doctrine and activism from its inception. Early Mennonites argued for the humanization of the “other”—of Jews and Muslims, as well as other Christian sects—who normally were ostracized in Protestant circles. Writings from the early sixteenth century (see Umlauft, *fl.* 1530s, Simons *fl.* 1530s, and Philips *fl.* 1530s) indicate a level of religious and even ethnic tolerance uncommon in other Christian sects at the time.

Mennonites have historically held a liberal stance toward the concept of human rights, even when surrounding cultural attitudes held a more constrictive definition. The *Mennonite Encyclopedia* defines human rights as “those basic rights which, when afforded by one person to another, indicate a belief in the other’s full humanity. Where a person or group denies these basic rights to others, that denial indicates a belief that the others are less than human.”⁶ This definition informed much of the later official Mennonite race relations rhetoric. Twentieth century Mennonite leadership embraced a theology of human rights based on the belief that every individual, regardless of status, is entitled to certain inalienable rights. The concept of “human rights”, they believed, is highly relational when humans endow others with these rights by their virtue of recognizing another’s humanity.

In a 1928 editorial from the *Missionary Messenger*, a Mennonite publication, an article entitled “The Stranger That Is Within Thy Gates” commented on the biblical precedent of racial reconciliation and unity: “Jesus said that his message was for all men.

⁴ Jeffrey Phillip Gingerich, “Sharing the Faith: Racial and Ethnic Identity in an Urban Mennonite Community” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2003), viii.

⁵ Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, ed. J.C. Wenger, trans. Leonard Verduin (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 529.

⁶ Duane Ruth-Heffelbower, “Human Rights,” in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia: A Comprehensive Reference Work on the Anabaptist-Mennonite Movement*, eds. Harold S. Bender and C. Henry Smith (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1989), 5: 399.

He rejected and exempted none on account of their race. His was always a message for all nations, to be delivered by his hearers to all nations. Race did not matter to him.”⁷ As early as 1928, then, Mennonites were conscious of racial distinctions and tensions, but this editorial did not indicate an awareness of the effect that the ethnic Mennonite identity had on their ability to effectively practice what Jesus had demonstrated in the gospels.

By 1945, many Mennonite congregations had accepted black persons and families for membership; however, these were typically isolated incidents of blacks becoming involved in predominantly white congregations and were not the result of active outreach into the African American community; programs geared toward this kind of outreach were not prevalent until the 1950s. In Harrisonburg, Virginia, for example, Roberta Webb, an African American woman, and her daughters became members of the Harrisonburg Mennonite Church,⁸ but this church was otherwise almost entirely white.



Figure 1. Roberta Webb and her daughters. Harrisonburg, Virginia.

Mennonite historian and record-keeper Le Roy Bechler reported that by 1955, the Mennonites had “for many reasons not entered the Negro communities to any great extent, however, there [was] a growing interest.”⁹ Bechler advocated a more active engagement of local African American communities: “It would be unwise strategy and stewardship today to give the major portion of attention and effort to some communities and ignore the people in the shadow of the Mennonite Church. To neglect is to invite religious and social racketeers to take over, and bring the displeasure of our Heavenly Father.”¹⁰ Bechler, along with other reconciliatory activists, promoted a much more proactive stance toward outreach into black communities.

⁷ “The Stranger that is Within Thy Gates,” *Missionary Messenger* no. 4, 1928, 1.

⁸ Eastern Mennonite University, “Checkered Past, Colorful Present,” *Crossroads Magazine* 87, no. 4 (2007), accessed 3 October 2014, <http://www.emu.edu/crossroads/spring07/full.pdf>, 9-12.

⁹ Le Roy Bechler, “Facts, Considerations, and Membership of Negroes in the Mennonite Church, 1955,” *Mennonite Church and Race Material Reports 1955-1963* (Negro Evangelism Committee, 1995), accessed 29 September 2014, <http://replica.palni.edu/cdm/ref/collection/gopplow/id/5726>, 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Mennonites held the honor of being among the first universities in the American South to accept black students, of whom Willis Johnson was the first. "One of the first, if not the first, accredited undergraduate colleges in the South to break the racial barrier was what is now Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia."¹¹ Willis Johnson's admittance to Eastern Mennonite University in 1948 did predate, for example, the desegregation of the University of Alabama in 1956 and the University of Georgia in 1959. EMU, however, had previously denied the application of at least one black man due to the conflict that the college felt was bound to spring up between "attitudes of northern and southern students."¹² While Mennonites may take pride in the fact that a denominational university holds the honor of being among the first to admit African American students, it is worth recognizing that it was not their immediate reaction to accept a black student.

At the denominational level of the Mennonite Church, race in the early twentieth century was considered an issue to be determined by individual churches. Because congregations were considered to be generally autonomous, the decision to include or exclude blacks was not an upper-level administrative one. It was made at the congregational level. As post-Reconstruction racial tensions progressed in the United States and eventually moved into the Civil Rights era, the Mennonite Church felt the need to address the issue on a larger scale. The surrounding cultural and social context of the early Civil Rights Movement demanded a unified denominational statement. The 1955 Mennonite General Conference then held discussions on race relations and adopted a statement directly addressing race, inequality, and segregation.

"The Way of Christian Love in Race Relations"

In 1955, the Mennonite General Conference adopted a statement called "The Way of Christian Love in Race Relations." This document stands as the church's official stance on the matter of race, segregation, and systems of inequality. The statement begins by asserting, "those who have been guilty of attitudes of prejudice and superiority have been unable to experience the fullness of the Christian life."¹³ In order to solidify their official

¹¹ The JBHE Foundation, "The College That Was a Pioneer in the Racial Integration of Southern Higher Education," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 59 (2008), 27, accessed 27 October 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25073873>.

¹² *Ibid.*, 27.

position as an integrative and tolerant organization, the Mennonite General Conference, using biblical, historical, and cultural perspectives, denounced segregation and discrimination as sins.

Biblically, the statement says, mankind is united under both the order of creation and the order of grace, and thus all men are on equal footing under God: “the Christian must regard every man as his brother in the flesh, whom he must love...”¹⁴ In the context of race relations, then, the church must “reach aggressively across all barriers with the call of the gospel,” and in doing so may “suffer persecution and injustice which they must be ready to accept with joy.”¹⁵ In reference to the traditional Mennonite doctrine of nonviolence and peacemaking, the statement asserts:

The way of the cross is the way of Christian nonresistance, where the egotisms of nation or race give way to Christian love and human solidarity. To refuse participation in warfare demands that Christians likewise rise above the practices of discrimination and coercion in other areas, such as race relations.

In the canon of scripture there are frequent references to a lack of distinction between races in the context of salvation; for example, according to Acts 17:26, God “made of one blood all nations of men.” The General Conference statement lists several of these examples as precedent for welcoming black congregants.

Furthermore, the adopted statement condemns racial discrimination and segregation as recent phenomena and as sinful: “We believe that racial prejudice and discrimination, as illustrated in the American pattern of segregation, or wherever it may be found, is a sin.”¹⁶ The statement addresses colonialism as the recent and unnatural perpetrator of the institution of slavery in America. The General Conference denounces “some Christian people” who have “deepened the confusion by claiming to find Biblical

¹³ The Mennonite General Conference. “The Way of Christian Love in Race Relations,” paper presented at the 29th Annual Mennonite General Conference, Hesston, KS, 23-26 August 1955. Published in *Twenty-ninth Mennonite General Conference*, Hesston College, Hesston, Kansas, August 23-26, 1955 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1955), 20-26, introduction.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, part I, sec. A.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, part 1, sec. D.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, part II, sec. B.

sanction and support for¹⁷ racism. After this vehement criticism of exclusion and discrimination, the next section of the statement contains a confession: “We confess that we have been blind when we should have seen the light; that we have failed to see that mere nonparticipation in violence and bloodshed is not an adequate expression of the doctrine of love to all men...”¹⁸ The confession is lengthy and blunt: “Too often our behavior has been determined by our selfish considerations of public and social approval more than by our desire to accept the way of the cross... Many times we have made it difficult for Christians of national origin different from our own to find fellowship among us because our own cultural pride and attitudes of exclusiveness served as obstacles...”¹⁹

Following the confession is a statement of hope that the Mennonite Church may reconcile itself to the African American community. The next sections deal with the perceived duties of the Mennonite Church in working toward reconciliation and the program of teaching and preaching planned to achieve this reconciliation. The duties begin with cultivating “a sense of belonging together on the basis of unity in Christ and discipleship.”²⁰ The Mennonite Church, at least the 1955 General Conference, hoped to become a beacon, a positive example for race relations in the United States.

The statement, obviously envisioned as a pivotal step in the journey toward church-wide integration, was received by every Mennonite congregation under the leadership of the General Conference. The conference intended, although perhaps did not realistically expect, each congregation to adopt the statement individually. It would become evident, however, that geography and local culture would affect congregations’ willingness to pledge their support for such an integration-driven policy. Particularly in the South and in the more conservative and ethnically exclusive Mennonite congregations—those who followed “Old Order” standards of faith and life, akin to Amish communities—the statement and the sentiments behind it would come up against serious opposition.

It is important to note that the adoption of a statement by denominational leadership did not constitute any binding contract or expectation for Mennonite congregations. As a congregationally driven denomination, Conference leaders could

¹⁷ Ibid., part III, sec. A.

¹⁸ Ibid., part IV, sec. A.

¹⁹ Ibid., part IV, sec. A.

²⁰ Ibid., part IV, sec. C.

adopt statements and pass resolutions in order to identify and direct the Mennonites' public position on national political and social issues, but churches were free to adopt or reject these statements as their congregants voted. While this gave churches the freedom and license to create cultures they were comfortable with, it also invited tension, both between churches and between local and national leadership.

“What Happens When Our Daughters Want To Marry Them?”

In the case of the some churches, aversion to conflict prevented active integration, and in some cases churches adopted segregationist positions as a way to preempt any racial tensions. Around Lancaster, Pennsylvania (an old-order Mennonite area), for example, “...because of various conflicts that arose it was felt that a separate [mission] should be started for black people.”²¹ In order to avoid the racial tensions that would inevitably surface in an integrated congregation, many churches opted not to integrate.

Well-intentioned pacifism and aversion to conflict were not necessarily the deep roots of anti-integration in these congregations, however. In the case of Lancaster, “These problems [inter-racial conflicts] are not specified or referred to in any existing documentation regarding the decision to open up the new mission, signifying a reluctance to openly address these issues of race. The underlying motivation that drove this decision, of course, was the assumed hierarchy of racial superiority that existed in Lancaster Conferences at this time.”²² Despite a professed belief in equality of humanity, regardless of race or nationality, the old-order ethnic Mennonites still subscribed, if quietly, to a belief in the superiority of whites over blacks.

Anna Frederick, a member of the [Philadelphia] Norris Square church from 1951 to 1970, described this period as it was told to her in 1951, noting the importance of racial prejudice in the decision:

...black people came to our Sunday school and so on and became members. Part of our congregation at that point said, “what happens when our daughters want to marry them and our sons want to marry their daughters.” And not long after that, the

²¹ Gingerich, “Sharing the Faith,” 53.

²² Ibid.

church decided that it would only be best if a separate mission was set up for black people.”²³

The mission was intended, as with most segregated environments at the time, to be “separate but equal.” The facilities were set up on Diamond Street and white pastoral families were brought in to minister. It should be noted that while the new “black” mission (called the “Mennonite Mission for the Colored”) thrived in its ministry to children, Norris Square remained predominantly white until the influx of Hispanic families to the area in the 1970s spurred the exodus of the white families that remained. This final refusal to integrate with another ethnic group ironically solidified the demise of Norris Square as an ethnically Mennonite congregation. Hispanic families replaced the white families that had left.

New pastoral families made significant attempts at a colorblind approach to ministering at the Mennonite Mission for the Colored—Diamond Street Mennonite Church, as it would come to be called. But it wasn’t until well into the 1960s that the churches and boards on the east coast would begin to question their position on the issue of race relations in their congregations. These changes were prompted more by demographic changes in their physical communities rather than any change of heart. “The Mennonite church was not isolated from the changing social dynamics that resulted from shifting racial demographics,”²⁴ and as housing anti-discrimination laws took effect, black families moved into previously white-dominated areas, and local churches were faced with the decision to accommodate or flounder. John D. Zehr, the pastor of a Los Angeles Mennonite congregation, spoke to this experience:

During my pastorate, the neighborhood where our church was located changed from an all-white neighborhood to one that was 80% colored. This caused some misunderstandings. Some members were bitter because of the ‘invasion.’ But as the colored people actually began to attend church, the attitude of some changed.²⁵

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 52.

²⁵ John D. Zehr, “Notes from Discussions,” ed. Guy Hershberger, in “Report of a Seminar on Christ, the Mennonite Churches, and Race,” *Mennonite Church and Race Material Reports 1955-1963* (Negro Evangelism Committee, 1995), accessed 29 October 2014, <http://replica.palni.edu/cdm/ref/collection/gopplow/id/5726>, 53.

As happened in many secular communities in the United States, the legally mandated integration that took place in the housing and employment sectors juxtaposed groups of people that would otherwise never have interacted. Simple exposure to the “other” was humanizing, and as Zehr testified, attitudes began to change.

“Ministers of Reconciliation”

In 1959, Vincent Harding, a prominent black Mennonite, gave a speech at the Woodlawn Mennonite Church in Chicago during a seminar on race. Vincent Harding was a leader in the Civil Rights movement: he founded the Mennonite House, an “interracial service center and gathering place,” assisting the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and other anti-segregation coalitions.²⁶ Harding was a speechwriter for Martin Luther King, Jr., a celebrated author, and a professor at several universities. Harding would later leave the Mennonite Church due to a conflict over responses to the Vietnam War.

In his Woodlawn speech, Harding determined three points of order necessary to establishing racial unity both within and outside of the Mennonite Church: defining the “problem of race” as a moral and spiritual problem, confessing the “sins of irresponsibility” that had plagued the Mennonites in previous attempts at race relations, and positioning themselves “near the heat of the battle,”²⁷ making themselves visible and available to bring peace.

Harding argued that the problem of race in America was not solely a social, cultural, or political problem, but “ultimately a moral problem, a problem concerning man’s sinful treatment of his brother man... the churches [have] failed, failed miserably – mostly through their apathy and their fearful, overcautious silence.”²⁸ Harding speaks to the Mennonites’ reputations as peacemakers: “If our peace witness is truly a witness to

²⁶ Kate Gibbons, “MLK Speechwriter, civil rights activist Vincent Harding dead,” *Denver Post*, 20 May 2014, accessed 1 December 2014, http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_25801786/mlk-speechwriter-civil-rights-activist-vincent-harding-dead.

²⁷ Vincent Harding, “The Task of the Mennonite Church in Establishing Racial Unity” (speech, meeting on race at Woodlawn Mennonite Church, Chicago, IL, 17-19 April 1959), transcript in “Report of a Seminar on Christ, the Mennonite Churches, and Race,” *Mennonite Church and Race Material Reports 1955-1963* (Negro Evangelism Committee, 1995), accessed 27 October 2014, <http://replica.palni.edu/cdm/ref/collection/gopplow/id/5726>, 35.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

our Lord rather than to our cultural peculiarities, it will draw men to Him.”²⁹ In order to live up to the title of peacemaker, Harding argued, Mennonites must actively involve themselves in racial reconciliatory efforts.

“We are the ministers of reconciliation;” Harding said, and as such, the Mennonites’ task was “to reconcile man to God and to man... and mediate to those whose hearts are wrenched by hatred...”³⁰ He called for acknowledgement that “we have too often allowed non-resistance to become synonymous with sitting on our hands and closing our eyes and turning our backs on injustice and hatred and violence against men. And in our silent acquiescence we have forgotten that our call is to resist evil...”³¹ These observations align with the confession section of the General Conference’s adopted statement.

At the same conference, Jacob Loewen gave a speech on race relations and the Gospel. In it he details the biblical ideas of race, the modern denotations of race, and the ideals of race relations as read in the New Testament. “Having viewed the doctrinal premises of the Gospel and having found no biological evidence to support the prohibition of racial intermixture,” Loewen said, “we now proceed to state the case of the New Testament in regards to integration within the Christian church.”³² Loewen gave biblical examples of what he calls a “beautiful statement on the removal of the barriers between God and man and between man and his fellows,”³³ while acknowledging some practical issues regarding race relations. These included sin (as a fundamental separator), and culture; our surrounding environment, Loewen maintained, has an influence on how we interpret the Bible and therefore how we interpret biblical race relations. Loewen concluded that by living true to the Mennonite doctrine and biblical faith, “spiritual fellowship can take place in the midst of the greatest cultural diversity.”³⁴

²⁹ Ibid., 36.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Jacob Loewen, “Race Relations and the Gospel” (speech, meeting on race at Woodlawn Mennonite Church, Chicago, IL, 17-19 April 1959), transcript in “Report of a Seminar on Christ, the Mennonite Churches, and Race,” *Mennonite Church and Race Material Reports 1955-1963* (Negro Evangelism Committee, 1995), accessed 27 October 2014, <http://replica.palni.edu/cdm/ref/collection/gopplow/id/5726>, 18.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 24.

J.D. Graber's speech at the Woodlawn Conference focused on race relations in the context of world evangelism; that is, missionary work. He spoke on the idea of the "white man's burden," the condescendingly paternalistic effort to "civilize" persons of other ethnicities, and on the recent events on the world political stage, which "made the race issue a very crucial one in world missions."³⁵ This is important rhetoric; however, Graber also touches on an often-overlooked consequence of America's divisiveness on the issue of race relations. In allowing the "war between the races" to rage unchecked even after emancipation, American missionaries lost much of their credibility in the field. Graber states point blank: "They don't like us."³⁶ News of America's rampant racism had reached international ears, and many would-be converts, particularly in Africa, rejected American missionaries, including Mennonites, on account of their apparent inability to "save" those in their own nation. This sentiment recalls the 1928 editorial in the *Missionary Messenger*, which asked:

Will the romance of an over-the-ocean view [of mission work] blind us to the fact that we have un-evangelized Africans closer than Africa who, despite their living in America, are not saved? In the language of a writer of seventy years ago, 'We send a missionary to the darkest part of Africa to convert the negro but we would not stir a finger for these negroes around us.'³⁷

For Mennonites, whose mission and service work is essential to their doctrine, this reaction had potentially devastating consequences. For a mission-oriented denomination, losing credibility in the field meant losing part of their purpose. In order to restore integrity and regain that purpose, it would be necessary to actively seek and facilitate a resolution to the problem of race in the United States. Mennonites, Graber said, "have a message of reconciliation and peace for the world,"³⁸ and so should work for reconciliation both at home and in the world.

³⁵ J.D. Graber, "Race Relations in World Evangelism," speech, meeting on race at Woodlawn Mennonite Church, Chicago, IL, 17-19 April 1959), transcript in "Report of a Seminar on Christ, the Mennonite Churches, and Race," *Mennonite Church and Race Material Reports 1955-1963* (Negro Evangelism Committee, 1995), accessed 27 October 2014, <http://replica.palni.edu/cdm/ref/collection/gopplow/id/5726>, 44.

³⁶ Graber, "Race Relations in World Evangelism," 45.

³⁷ "The Stranger That Is Within Thy Gates," 2.

³⁸ Graber, "Race Relations in World Evangelism," 45.

Reverend Ralph Abernathy, a close associate of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., also spoke at the Woodlawn Conference. Abernathy was not a Mennonite; like King, he was a Baptist. His invitation to the Woodlawn Conference was based on his work in the early Civil Rights Movement with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; Abernathy was virtually an expert in race relations. His speech, entitled "Race as a Challenge to the Christian Church," appealed to the Mennonites' pacifist sensibilities by comparing racial tensions and conflicts to war, even to the great wars. Abernathy spoke of the increasingly globalized nature of the world, the phenomenon of the world becoming smaller by virtue of air travel, communications technology advancements, and the like. "Science has made of our world a neighborhood," Abernathy said, "but religion has failed to make it a brotherhood."³⁹

Abernathy walks briefly through the history of imperialism and colonialism, then through the era of slavery, the legalization of slavery, then of segregation. "The Negro was taught that he was inherently unequal,"⁴⁰ Abernathy said. This problem, he said, and the other problems that accompanied the race issue, were moral, not political problems. "Segregation does as much to the segregator as it does to the segregated."⁴¹ The feeling of superiority, as well as the feeling of inferiority, is a great injustice. Abernathy tasks the church with solving the race problem: "If this problem is to be genuinely and everlastingly solved, it must be solved by and through the Christian Church... The Church must get to the root of race hatred."⁴²

"Our Duty to Work Against Social Injustice"

At the individual level, Mennonite opinions on race and segregation varied as widely as the congregational responses. A portion of the Woodlawn meeting time was devoted to hearing testimonies and stories from Mennonites from across the United States. Orla Kauffman, a Mississippi Mennonite, described the situation as he saw it in his home state:

³⁹ Ralph Abernathy, "Race as a Challenge to the Christian Church," speech, meeting on race at Woodlawn Mennonite Church, Chicago, IL, 17-19 April 1959), transcript in "Report of a Seminar on Christ, the Mennonite Churches, and Race," *Mennonite Church and Race Material Reports 1955-1963* (Negro Evangelism Committee, 1995), accessed 27 October 2014, <http://replica.palni.edu/cdm/ref/collection/gopplow/id/5726>, 27.

⁴⁰ Abernathy, "Race as a Challenge to the Christian Church," 29.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 30.

The majority of Mennonites in Mississippi have attitudes toward the Negro not unlike those of the Southern whites generally... There is a feeling of superiority... All Mennonite congregations in Mississippi have accepted segregation. The majority of members believe segregation proper... There is growing concern with respect to our responsibility on this question.⁴³

Southern Mennonites evidently struggled to accept the principles of the General Conference statement. Kauffman's statement hinted at a level of discomfort surrounding even discussion of the issue; he noted that Mississippi Mennonites bristled at being ascribed responsibility for race relations at all. If this account is at all indicative of the situation in the South as a whole, then it is clear that the local cultural attitudes surrounding the race issue colored the Mennonite doctrine there.

Linden Wenger, a Virginia Mennonite, spoke to both the history and the situation in 1959 there: "Prior to the Civil War, the Virginia Mennonites forbade slavery, and even in employing slave labor, they insisted on paying the slave something personally. Beyond this and since this, however, not too much has been said."⁴⁴ Wenger described memories of race interactions in his own congregation: "About 1920 the question was raised whether Negroes might become members of the church. The answer was in the affirmative, but with a word of caution against integration and fellowship, which should not be too intimate. Since then, however, some progress has been made."⁴⁵ Wenger evidently desired more "intimate" fellowship and relationship between blacks and whites in his congregation. Wenger was evidently comforted, however, by the Virginia Mennonites' historical stance against slavery.

Perhaps this sentiment was not isolated to Wenger's mind; when examining personal accounts and testimonies of mid-twentieth century white, Southern

⁴³ Orla Kauffman, "Notes from Discussions," ed. Guy Hershberger, in "Report of a Seminar on Christ, the Mennonite Churches, and Race," *Mennonite Church and Race Material Reports 1955-1963* (Negro Evangelism Committee, 1995), accessed 29 October 2014, <http://replica.palni.edu/cdm/ref/collection/gopplow/id/5726>, 53.

⁴⁴ Linden Wenger, "Notes from Discussions," ed. Guy Hershberger, in "Report of a Seminar on Christ, the Mennonite Churches, and Race," *Mennonite Church and Race Material Reports 1955-1963* (Negro Evangelism Committee, 1995), accessed 29 October 2014, <http://replica.palni.edu/cdm/ref/collection/gopplow/id/5726>, 52.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Mennonites, there is a certain sense of complacency and self-satisfaction found in the idea that one's ancestors were anti-slavery. After all, it follows, if Mennonites had always advocated for the self-government and well-being of African Americans, there would be no need for a change in practice or mindset.

Curtis Burrell was a black Mennonite who attended Ontario Bible Institute. During the Woodlawn discussions, he gave the following observation: "Perhaps we Negroes should not be too much concerned to pursue integration; at least, not to use un-Christian means of doing so. The most important thing is to be free in Christ."⁴⁶ Here Burrell, perhaps tellingly so, de-emphasizes the African American desire for integration in the Mennonite Church. It is worth considering whether Burrell found the Mennonite "race question" futile enough to give up on and instead focused on issues with which he knew white Mennonites would agree—like the vital nature of salvation. Delton Franz, Vincent Harding's co-pastor, said in response: "Curtis Burrell was very gracious in confessing that salvation is more important than freedom from injustice. But we Mennonites must not take refuge behind this in order to evade our duty to work against social injustice among those who have not the Gospel."⁴⁷ Franz, who was a leader in Mennonite race relations, here denied what may have been Burrell's attempt to bury the discussion and called upon the Mennonite tradition of peace and justice work to validate the integration cause.

Conclusion

Mennonites, despite a publicly unified pro-integration position toward race relations, were as varied in their congregational and individual responses as Americans in general; some responded with enthusiasm, some with trepidation, and some with frigidity. While some congregations experienced upsurges in black attendance and membership, others were decidedly segregated, and in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, some predominantly black Mennonite churches sprang up. While these events and actions were not isolated to the Mennonite Church, it serves as a prime

⁴⁶ Curtis Burrell, "Notes from Discussions," ed. Guy Hershberger, in "Report of a Seminar on Christ, the Mennonite Churches, and Race," *Mennonite Church and Race Material Reports 1955-1963* (Negro Evangelism Committee, 1995), accessed 29 October 2014, <http://replica.palni.edu/cdm/ref/collection/gopplow/id/5726>, 58.

⁴⁷ Delton Franz, "Notes from Discussions," ed. Guy Hershberger, in "Report of a Seminar on Christ, the Mennonite Churches, and Race," *Mennonite Church and Race Material Reports 1955-1963* (Negro Evangelism Committee, 1995), accessed 29 October 2014, <http://replica.palni.edu/cdm/ref/collection/gopplow/id/5726>, 60.

example of the paradox of practical exclusivism in a denomination of doctrinal universalism.

The Mennonite Church would go on to become a small but active player in the field of race relations. The 1969 Black National Economic Conference's "Black Manifesto," a document demanding reparations from white Christian churches and Jewish synagogues to African Americans, was mirrored by a seventeen-point statement from the Mennonite Urban Racial Council to the Mennonite General Conference. The Mennonite General Conference responded to the Urban Racial Council's seventeen points with five of their own, all in favor of the Council's requests, and a reaffirmation of the 1955 statement. Today, Mennonites still walk the balance between theological pacifism and practical reconciliation.

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