Mennonites, peace, and the global church

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Mennonite thinking on peace and Mennonite presence and practice since World War II have left profound and lasting marks on world Christianity and on the larger peace movement. And in that process Mennonites and their peace witness have also been changed.

J. R. Burkholder's article on peace in volume 5 of *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* ends with this observation:

> *At the end of the 1980s, it is difficult to assess the Mennonite peace position. On one hand, there has been impressive growth in church agency activity, in educational programs, and in theological sophistication. In the wider Christian world, the cogency and relevance of Mennonite pacifism has made a significant impact. At the same time, the rapid assimilation of Mennonites into the mainstream of society (particularly in the Western world) threatens to erode the traditional commitment to stand over against the world in faithful obedience to the love of Christ.*[1]

The decades since the 1980s have seen significant developments. Fernando Enns provides a detailed account and assessment of Mennonite engagement in ecumenical interaction on peace at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century.[2] My aim here is to draw a picture in broad strokes starting with the nineteenth century and looking to the future.

Mennonites and pacifism before World War II

Today's global developments and the gradual reappearance of pacifist thinking and movements, diverse as they may be, prompt us to pause for a brief consideration of Mennonites and pacifism in

the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The term *pacifism* is of some importance here, because it gathers any and all movements that are opposed to war, resist militarism, and reject the idea that peace and justice come through violent means. Such movements have always met with strong opposition and often with some form of oppression or persecution.

Before World War I, the pacifist movement was prominent at all levels of society and in the churches of Europe and North America, but it went largely unnoticed by Mennonites of that time on either continent. Interest in ecumenical interaction came only later, after World War II. Mark Jantzen has shown that Mennonites in nineteenth-century Prussia for the most part were not among those objecting to military service.[3] It is not easy to find traces of Mennonite objection to military service or Mennonite resistance to war in Europe during World War I or World War II.

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Those Mennonites of European origin who continued to hold a pacifist position migrated to North America. There they were instrumental in setting up alternatives to military service. But these Mennonite communities were socially isolated, had a dualist worldview and a dispensationalist theology, and were to a substantial degree able to maintain nonconformity to the world, including refusal of military service. These homogeneous communities were not prepared to engage with the world by cooperating with Christians of other confessions, much less with pacifists who were not Christian. Mennonites' cultural isolation seems to have prevented them from seeing potential sisters and brothers outside the borders of their communities.

Mainline churches call on historic peace churches

That isolation changed with post–World War II trauma in Europe, during which International Fellowship of Reconciliation[4] and the historic peace churches, including Mennonites, were called to sit down with mainline church leaders to discuss war and peace. Mennonite Central Committee staff in Europe, some of

whom were students motivated by Harold Bender's recovery of Anabaptist vision and influenced by Guy Hershberger's promotion of peace witness, found themselves giving leadership to these initial dialogues, referred to as the Puidoux Conferences.[5]

This is where Anabaptist-Mennonite perspectives, articulated most thoroughly by John Howard Yoder, were beginning to change the churches' discourse on war and peace in a lasting way. The deepest impact came through the insistence that the church as the body of Christ celebrates the cross and resurrection of Christ as redemptive events while actually following the way of Jesus, who announced the kingdom of God not only for a distant future but beginning now and here. The commitment to peacemaking is therefore not a moral derivative of an abstract or ritualized religious belief but an essential mark of Christian existence.

European Mennonites were minimally involved in the Puidoux Conferences, and they were not affected directly. Language may have been a major reason, with church leaders not being fluent in English. However, among some pastors of mainline churches, and especially among ecumenical grassroots communities of the 1960s and 1970s, there was strong resonance and a desire to pursue peace as central to the gospel. Mennonite Central Committee supported these efforts, from which the European ecumenical network Church and Peace grew.[6] Church and Peace encouraged mainline churches to participate, on the way to becoming peace churches. For some Mennonites in Europe, this network opened the door to ecumenical experience and the discovery of spiritual treasures.

Ecumenical presence with a peace agenda

Apart from the Dutch Mennonites (ADS) and the North Germans (Vereinigung), who were founding members of the World Council of Churches, European Mennonites until the mid-1980s had minimal ecumenical interaction, and the primary Mennonite initiative for ecumenical work came from North America. Mennonite Central Committee's priority in Europe during the 1980s was interchurch and peace agenda. That priority was driven by a concern for peace—understood as going beyond refusal to participate in war—which was growing in the North American Menno-

nite community as a result of the Vietnam War and the threat of nuclear war. Marlin Miller, and then his brother Larry Miller, carried MCC's peace portfolio and nurtured many contacts in various confessional circles. There was the Eastern Europe Fraternity, with personnel placed in Eastern Europe to engage with Christians of various confessions. MCC and Mennonite Board of Missions jointly supported Mennonite centers in London, Paris, and Brussels, all of which were propagating a peace theology. For a time the Brussels Mennonite Centre published *NATO Watch*, a rare Mennonite effort involving both North Americans and Europeans (through European Mennonite Peace Committee) addressing issues on the political/military level.

Initiative to promote a peace agenda in Europe came primarily from North American Mennonite service workers. In its beginnings the Military Counseling Network in Germany relied on North American initiative.[7] The Anabaptist peace witness clearly found more resonance outside traditional European Mennonite communities than within them. The Anabaptist Network in the United Kingdom is a telling example.[8]

Nonviolent accompaniment

At Mennonite World Conference Assembly in Strasbourg, France, in 1984, Ron Sider called for development of "a new nonviolent peacekeeping force . . . ready to move into violent conflicts and stand peacefully between warring parties"; these peacekeepers would place themselves between "the weak and the oppressor," acting with "courage to move from the back lines of isolationist pacifism to the front lines of nonviolent peacemaking."[9]

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The response to Sider was extraordinary: much excitement, wonder, head shaking. People well beyond Mennonite circles heard his call. Little did we know then of the shape this vision would take in the early twenty-first century. Meanwhile, Anabaptist peace theology became more global, shifting from a Euro-centric and North American–driven base to the global South.

Today, the idea of international nonviolent accompaniment in areas of grave injustice and armed conflict has taken on remarkable significance and proved to be rather effective. If this accompaniment doesn't end a conflict or dramatically change the course of events, it does help protect civilians and inhibit armed action against particular people in specific areas. It helps vulnerable people become more visible and increases international awareness of injustice and violence, putting checks on perpetrators' actions and increasing pressure on governments and paramilitaries and other warring factions to find ways of settling issues. On top of that, it promotes nonviolence and has in its turn influenced many Mennonites.

The initiative that arose in response to Sider's call, Christian Peacemakers Teams (CPT), struggled for years to find recognition and support in traditional Mennonite circles. Meanwhile it didn't go unnoticed in the ecumenical world and in the secular peace movement. The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel, inspired by CPT, became a flagship program for the World Council of Churches at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Peace Brigades International, International Fellowship of Reconciliation, and Nonviolent PeaceForce all have accompaniment programs. In Colombia alone, several such international projects have been active.

The concept of accompaniment is not exclusively a Mennonite product, but Mennonite theology and practice inspired it and contributed to its realization. If Mennonite peacemaking is credible around the world, down to the grassroots, it is largely because of the presence of people who believe that God is already there and at work through local wisdom, leadership, and gifts. That's where Mennonite theology of presence fits in powerful ways, almost regardless of doctrinal orientation. And that clearly is not a one-way street but has deep impact on the sending community.

Conflict transformation and peacebuilding

Likewise, if conflict transformation and peacebuilding have become academic disciplines across the world, it is in part because of Mennonite thinking and practice/presence in areas of armed conflict. Anyone interested in the subject knows about John Paul Lederach's pioneering and crucial contributions. The theory and

practice of these relatively new disciplines require an engagement with the world and with likeminded actors going beyond the possibilities envisioned by earlier Mennonite communities and their leaders. Such interaction has had an impact on the Mennonite community.

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Ecumenical dialogues affirm and challenge Mennonites

The 1980s also saw the beginning of two decades of bilateral dialogue between Mennonites and other confessional bodies. These dialogues, fruitful and influential in the long run as they may be, have also been seedbeds for friendship that leads to increased interaction and collaboration on multiple levels and with immediate effect. One particular and perhaps surprising outcome was the report from the Catholic-Mennonite Dialogue: "Together Called to be Peacemakers."[10] The report points to an affinity between Mennonites and Catholics not obvious at first glance to either side: a commitment to peace, grounded in an understanding of community. These dialogues affirmed and challenged Mennonites as communities and as a Christian world communion to be more assertive on issues of peace and nonviolence.

From overcoming violence to just peace

By the mid-1990s, Mennonite Central Committee seconded a service worker to the World Council of Churches Programme to Overcome Violence. Beginning in 2001, the Decade to Overcome Violence was the fruit of deliberate historic peace church conversations and a joint determination to make a difference in the ecumenical world. Now, with a new focus on overcoming violence, Mennonites and their historic peace church friends were compelled to get directly involved. Fernando Enns, a young German Mennonite representative to the WCC Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1998, made a motion for a Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV). This idea had been taken off the agenda prior to the meeting by WCC leaders who felt it didn't stand a chance. But Enns's motion was accepted with rare enthusi-

asm. The DOV, however one assesses its results, forever changed the ecumenical profile of Mennonites. They are now seen as an integral part of the emerging deliberations—some still prefer to refer to it as a conciliar process of the churches—on just peace.

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Where this process will take the ecumenical movement remains uncertain, but Mennonites will be part of it. The ecumenical movement, although not unanimous with regard to nonviolence or war, has come to a point of acknowledging that the meaning and implementation of just peace must be a higher priority for Christians and the church than the question of whether and when war may be just. The International Ecumenical Peace Convocation in Kingston, Jamaica, in 2011, marked the end of the DOV and displayed a somewhat new spirit. Liberation theology had insisted that there can be no peace without justice; now there was a stronger sense that just peace is the vocation of the church, and that it leaves little or no room for armed intervention. The participating churches have not reached consensus on whether there is room for such intervention (and if so, how much), so the ecumenical challenge and journey is ongoing.[11]

A living peace church?

To what extent do Mennonites see themselves as ecumenical players? In the nineteenth and early twentieth century they were *die Stillen im Lande* (the quiet in the land), and their refusal of military service was more or less accommodated. Global Mennonites of the twenty-first century are in a very different position. In Europe others remind them of their identity as a historic peace church. Now and in the future, their national authorities may no longer graciously grant them a kind of minority status.

Nor are they homogeneous communities with little exposure to the outside world. Many—especially in the Global South, but also increasingly in the Northern Hemisphere—are directly exposed to or part of social, political, or religious tension, which calls for wise and courageous nonviolent action. Amazing stories emerge from such contexts in Indonesia and Colombia, among

other places. One can see hopeful indicators that Mennonites are a living peace church.

Stuart Murray in *The Naked Anabaptist* points out that Mennonite tradition, faithful as it may have appeared, also kept Mennonites from living up to their calling as a people of peace.[12] That reality was visible in debates emerging in the 1980s in Mennonite World Conference meetings, when delegates from Africa stated that they had not been prepared by their missionaries for the real meaning of being a peace church. They had learned about baptism, communion, and Mennonite customs, but now, they said, "we are told that we are a historic peace church, but we don't really know what that implies." Paul Gingrich, then president of Mennonite Board of Missions, suggested that North American mission agencies have a responsibility to help churches in the South catch up on the peace agenda. Meanwhile, many Mennonite churches in the Southern Hemisphere have as much experience as—if not more experience than—their northern counterparts in embodying a theology and practice of just peace or nonviolent resistance. Many impressive stories from Indonesia, Australia, and Africa illustrate this reality.

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Another global development, about which Mennonites may feel torn, is the further decline of historic confessional structures and the increase of nondenominational, evangelical, charismatic, Pentecostal, and other church groups and movements. As Mennonite denominational loyalties weaken, and as Mennonites seek relationships with other Christians, will nonviolence and peace be decisive elements or marginal ones in forging alliances? The true global horizon of the twenty-first century is not how we respond to the threat of terrorism but how we live out our faith through nonviolent action.

In such contexts, Mennonites are not the only ones to be challenged, nor can they act alone. In what respect and to what extent will they be willing to cooperate with unlikely partners, including non-Christian pacifists? Will our actions be oriented by insight or will they be fixated on cultural identity and doctrine?

Will commitment to peace and nonviolence be primary, or will it be circumscribed by traditional and confessional issues? Given the diversity within the Mennonite fold, and given the fading of our ethnic identification, what will be our distinctive mark? These are crucial questions.

If Mennonites make nonviolence and just peace a priority again, and join others with new insights and new approaches, they can be sure they will be in good company. Part of the challenge for Mennonites is that we no longer can pretend to be the faithful few when it comes to peace. The people of God is a reality that is larger than the people of Menno. This is true in both a geographical and a confessional sense. Divine grace brings us together with unlikely sisters and brothers.

Notes

[1] J. R. Burkholder, "Peace," in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. 5 (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990), 685; online: http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/P4ME.html.
[2] Fernando Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community: Ecclesiology and the Ethics of Nonviolence* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2007)
[3] Mark Jantzen: Mennonite German Soldiers: Nation, Religion and Family in the Prussian East, 1772-1880; Notre Dame, IN, 2010
[4] IFOR, incorporated in 1919, was the first significant international pacifist organization, deeply rooted in and closely affiliated with churches.
[5] See Paul Peachey, "Puidoux Conferences," in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* 5:738; online: http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/P856.html.
[6] See http://www.church-and-peace.org/.
[7] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_Counseling_Network; http://www.mc-network.de/.
[8] See http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/.
[9] Http://www.cpt.org/resources/writings/sider.
[10] Http://www.mwc-cmm.org/sites/default/files/report_cathomenno_final_eng.pdf.
[11] An Ecumenical Call to Just Peace states: "On the Way of Just Peace the justifications of armed conflict and war become increasingly implausible and unacceptable"; http://www.overcomingviolence.org/fileadmin/dov/files/iepc/resources/ECJustPeace_English.pdf.
[12] Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010).

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