Testimony in the Church of the Brethren

Frank Ramirez

Question: What do you get when you cross a Brethren with a Jehovah's Witness? Answer: Someone who knocks on your door but isn't sure why.

The Church of the Brethren has been hemorrhaging members in recent decades: in the 1950s, our membership exceeded 250,000; today it is less than a 150,000. Part of the problem is that Brethren, like many plain people, once grew in numbers by being fairly fertile, and now families have fewer children. But it's also possible that we have become uncomfortable with the idea of testimony, or any sort of evangelism, and that is affecting the size of our communion. Ask a typical Brethren to describe the denomination and you might be told, "We're sort of like the Mennonites." Not long ago our general board turned to a communication firm to create a slogan for us: "Continuing the Work of Jesus: Simply, Peacefully, Together."

Brethren have a wonderful testimony, but we lack a unified voice on those things that set us apart. Acculturation and a preference for individual conviction have made it difficult to profess the historical core values about which we now disagree.

Not that being unsure what to say is a new problem; we are not a particularly articulate people. Apparently a nineteenth-century European traveler once asked a group of Brethren elders why they wore long beards with no mustaches. They didn't know. In a few congregations evangelism is done well, but most Brethren are uncomfortable with talking about the church.

The fundamentalist Brethren Revival Fellowship blamed the staggering losses of the last sixty years on a drift away from evangelism and the espousal of liberalism. But the Church of the Brethren has always been far more conservative than its leadership, and more conservative socially and theologically than the population of the United

States in general. Staunchly against gun control, Brethren own guns in a larger percentage than the general population. The majority of Brethren are against abortion and gay marriage, and they favor biblical literalism.

It's not as if there isn't anything worth pointing to. The Brethren Service Explosion would make a wonderful testimony. After World War II, Brethren either founded or were in on the founding of Heifer Project International, CROP, Church World Service, as well as the Peace Corp (a direct imitation of Brethren Volunteer Service). The Brethren Service Center in New Windsor, Maryland, was a major channel for postwar relief to Europe. The Brethren Service Commission was an integral player in rebuilding Europe. American politician, diplomat, and pastor Andrew Young once said that his formal training in foreign affairs consisted of his participation in Brethren Volunteer Service. Civilian Public Service stories are gripping tales. Conservative as well as progressive Brethren take pride in these stories—when they remember them. So why no testimony? Here are my guesses.

First, we're doers, not talkers.

Second, unlike Mennonites, who experienced trial by fire, only a few Brethren have paid for their witness with their lives.

Third, the European Brethren were a disconnected people who could say with the gospel song writer, "I can't feel at home in this world anymore." When the first Brethren baptism took place in 1708 in Schwarzenau, Germany, Alexander Mack's followers were already religious refugees living far from home. Their migrations to the new world in 1719 and 1729 meant Brethren could put down new roots. They did. Lacking a connection to their homeland, Brethren sought security in owning more and better land.

Migration was and would remain economic and not evangelistic. Evangelistic fervor in 1723–24 led to the founding of several crucial new congregations in Pennsylvania. Meanwhile Brethren were moving out through Maryland and Virginia, on into Ohio and Indiana, and west to Kansas and then on to settle on the Pacific slope. They founded new churches in the places to which they moved not for missionary reasons but in search of cheap, plentiful land and fertile soil.

Fourth, while Mennonites produced defining official statements, Brethren avoided these formulations. When the movement

began, adherents reacted against the state churches' use of creeds as tests of loyalty. Brethren insisted they had no creed but the Bible, a stance that has some merits but does not lend itself to a succinct, crisp statement of faith. Things got more arcane as the system of Annual Meeting developed, in which the body meeting together defined faith and practice. By the time Henry Kurtz published the *Brethren's Encyclopedia* in 1867 in order to organize Annual Meeting decisions by category, the ability to articulate a clear Brethren testimony required something akin to rabbinic delight in Talmudic minutiae.

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In the early twentieth century, when Brethren conservatism was clashing with Brethren fundamentalism, someone devised and then revised a "Brethren's card." The card presented testimony that a tongue-tied Brethren could hand to a stranger. It did not require speech. But the card smacked of creedalism, anathema to the Brethren. Mostly Brethren were content to let others learn about them through observation "of the manner of their living."

Brethren were always open to accepting new members. Some of these new members, including Henry Kurtz, pioneer printer, and Peter Nead, the first real theologian among the Brethren, made significant contributions to the faith. It is telling that these converts found the Brethren; the Brethren did not go out looking for them.

In addition to a general inability to articulate the faith, two other critical developments made it difficult for Brethren to testify. The first was the result of a race to write the first Brethren history.

Brethren history had been largely anecdotal until antiquarian and book collector Abraham Harley Cassel (1820–1908) gave it shape and meaning through a series of articles printed in various Brethren periodicals. Cassel weighed in on historical questions when prompted—and sometimes at his own initiative. Though he had a scant few weeks of formal education, the self-taught historian amassed the greatest collection of German-language materials

of his era, and single-handedly preserved manuscripts, letters, and other items that formed the source material for Brethren history.

However Cassel considered himself uneducated and did not trust himself to write an official history. In the years leading up to the Brethren bicentennial in 1908, several individuals either started or considered writing that first history. But it was Martin Grove Brumbaugh, educator, college president, and future governor of Pennsylvania, who burst onto the scene, borrowing Cassel's materials and writing the history in the space of a few months.

The history, published in 1899, demonstrated the truth that whoever controls the past controls the future. Brumbaugh painted Brethren as a progressive force in colonial America, creators of the first Sunday school, operators of a denominational press, led by scholars—all of which, as Brethren historian Donald F. Durnbaugh and Brethren sociologist Carl Bowman have pointed out, sounds wonderful but happens to be untrue.

Brumbaugh wrote that the nonconformist Brethren did not insist on unanimity in their unity but espoused freedom of conscience in all religious matters; he held that Brethren were to be judged "by the manner of their living" rather than by a profession of faith. With all members thus made responsible for their own professions of faith, it became even less clear exactly what Brethren believed. What Brumbaugh articulated were the beliefs of the progressive faction among the Brethren: individual conscience trumps joint Bible study and mutual accountability. There would no longer be a unified testimony.

Martin Grove Brumbaugh's history would mean trouble for the future of this peace church. If ever an incident created a disjuncture in Brethren history, it was the debacle surrounding World War I and the Goshen Statement of 1918. Brethren, as one of the three traditional peace churches, had had a nonresistant stance from their beginnings. Like Mennonites and Friends, they were content to live under and support the established government to the extent that they were able, but they had suffered during the American Revolution and the Civil War when they refused to take up arms. In the period between 1865 and 1917, Brethren may have become more acculturated. In any case, they were ill prepared to respond to the U.S.'s entry into the "War to End All Wars."

The substantial antiwar movement in the United States ("I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier") dissolved when the United States entered the war. The sudden rise of an ultrajingoistic nationalism left no room for cowards, yellowbellies, and slackers—as religious objectors came to be called. Drafted Brethren sought counsel about whether to refuse induction, seek noncombatant status, or drill with the other inductees. Panicked, the Church of the Brethren met in an extraordinary special Annual Conference on January 9, 1918, in Goshen, Indiana. The resulting Goshen Statement, as it was called, professed loyalty to the government, reiterated the Brethren stance that all war is sin, offered support and encouragement to Brethren drafted into the armed services, and called on the government to grant alternative service to Brethren inductees.

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On July 8, 1918, Brethren officials were threatened with arrest and prosecution for sedition. Denominational leaders met with government officials and officially withdrew the Goshen Statement. Their rationale: it would have been disastrous if Brethren leaders had been arrested. Historians have largely condemned this decision. Young Brethren men were left in the lurch to determine their own level of cooperation with the military, or lack thereof. In the hands of sadistic officers and fellow soldiers, they were prey to persecution, torture, and even murder.

One positive result of this debacle was that Brethren, though no longer united in their peace stance, developed a group of determined young leaders who worked with other peace churches to ensure that during the next conflict, authentic public alternative service would be available for conscientious objectors. And that in turn led to the progressive Brethren Service Explosion.

Despite heroic stories from Civilian Public Service, involving Brethren willing to serve as smoke jumpers, in the Starvation Experiment, and as medical guinea pigs, the majority of Brethren made the choice to serve as combatants during the "Good War."

Brethren have a wonderful testimony, but especially at the level of the local congregation we lack a unified voice on what

sets us apart. Acculturation and a preference for individual conviction rather than group assurance has made it difficult to profess the historical core values about which we now disagree.

If there is hope for our future, it is that Brethren, when they remember, testify by pointing to the community. Rufus P. Bucher (1883–1956) was a popular Brethren evangelist and preacher, whose two hundred revivals—meetings, as the Brethren referred to them—led to nearly three thousand individuals joining the church. One day the plain-garbed Bucher was approached by a young man who put an evangelistic tract in his hand and asked, "Brother, are you saved?" Bucher replied, "That is a good question and deserves an answer. I think, however, that I might be prejudiced in my own behalf. You'd better go down to Quarryville [Pennsylvania] and ask George Hensel, the hardware merchant, what he thinks about it. Or you might go to the Mechanic Grove grocer or to one of my neighbors in Unicorn. While there you might ask my wife and children. I'll be ready to let their answers stand as my own." Bucher's candid testimony illustrates that our testimony has come from without and only reluctantly from within.

For further reading

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About the author

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