Affectionate memories of traditional and transitional Mennonite worship in Pennsylvania

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Most of the Mennonite worship I experienced in my youth was in the ambience of a rural mission congregation founded in 1931. However, I also fairly frequently got into the traditional congregations of both the Franconia and Lancaster Mennonite Conferences, 1935–48. In later decades, it has been my privilege to visit services of quite a few conservative Mennonite congregations where the patterns of earlier eras are still in evidence. Here I shall muse informally on remembered elements of singing and preaching in these settings.[1]

Was there something profound residual in traditional Mennonite worship, an afterglow of a radical sense of community from four centuries earlier? Was there in our weekly regathering in itself a feeling of sacrament?

In a local funeral sermon of 1936, unusual for that time in its discursive rather than incantatory manner, one of our traditional ministers described the life of his deceased pulpit colleague as characterized by "love and humility."[2] Those were iconic words. Even on the way to meeting, these attitudes were palpable. A local Dunker remembered that horses were kept to an appropriately moderate going-to-meeting trot (*fasammling drot*). On the half-mile hill between our neighbor's mill and the Salford meetinghouse, miller Abraham Groff required his children to refrain from talking, and another neighbor allowed only discussion of spiritual subjects.

Singing

The first voice heard in our traditional Sunday gatherings, sometimes partly muffled, other times strong, announced the number of a song. The song leader, seated near the front of the congregation, was heard but not necessarily seen. This was not a venue in which an individual, especially one not ordained, should call attention to his own presence or role. It was our time, and God's

time, not his time. Only during the less sacred Sunday school hour would a leader stand and beat time. Among the "Old Orders" in Lancaster County, the song leader's voice came from one of the seated men around the singers' table in the front and center of the gathering. This arrangement was reminiscent of the layout of farm dwellings which in colonial times had served as meetinghouses *(G'meehäuser)* for worship.

Two modes of singing, with differing emotional qualities, are still employed in the traditional communities. The older mode, which I heard mostly in German, is still alive among Old Order Mennonites and Amish. The sometimes hardly recognizable melodies, sung strongly, nasally, and in unison, linger over the syllables. Impatience has no function here; our Amish friends get their full spiritual dollar's worth out of every word. The melodies are full of mordents (swift, mournful-sounding undulations) and melismas that may vary somewhat from community to community but remain stable in their local settings.

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Although in my youth such grace notes already sounded almost bewilderingly quaint or melancholy, I privately enjoyed and imitated them. Meanwhile, elements of the folkish, mordent-employing "old" style were emerging in songs on the radio—in Bing Crosby's crooning; in country and western music; in Black Gospel; and in later, rawer, folk-tinged pop. After a while, this tendency actually took over; even our Mennonite young people when singing solos in church could sing no other way than to round off or slide into the notes. Surely elements of this mode, allowing words or phrases to be emotionally decorated, echo medieval European singing that was influenced by Byzantine sources.

Unlike the Old Orders, Franconia conference leaders in the previous half-century had blessed singing in four parts as a healthy metaphor for spiritual harmony. It was certainly to be enjoyed, and where singing schools had been welcomed for a century, to be characterized by unselfconscious gusto. The chorister himself was expected to sing loudly enough to be heard to the four corners of the Franconia congregation's large meeting room. Individuals

were permitted to sing at the top of their voices. Such enthusiastic participation was especially likely during the singing of gospel songs, which were accepted in the church service itself in the early twentieth century. Sixty years later, I can still hear my Sunday school teacher's tenor singing the refrain, "Hope of earth and joy of heav'n."

In both unison and harmonic modes, the traditional singing had the sound not of performance but of community. People sang in a way that blended rather than individuated their voices.

In a large congregation at full volume, your ears could ring. A cousin at Salford remembers that his ears hurt when he sat across the aisle from Susan Clemens or Mrs. Jake Detweiler as they shrilled out the alto of "She only touched the hem of His garment / As to His side she stole." Particularly for young people, singing could be the high point of the service. For them, of course, the gospel songs of the Moody-Sankey era may have been the most enjoyable. Personally, I found the noble imagery of great hymns—"Each angel sweeps his lyre / And claps his wings of fire"—to have the most lasting spiritual effect.

In our Montgomery County community, a Brethren song leader of Mennonite ancestry in his nineties still retained the traditionally stentorian chorister's voice. He needed no microphone. His nineteenth-century intonation and pronunciation were clearly audible as late as the late 1970s. A family historian pointed out that in this man's family, musicality could be traced in an unbroken line to a Mennonite farmer who had sung his way out of a jail in Philadelphia during the American Revolution. Some said his daughter could learn the tenor part of a new hymn before the men of the community did. Astoundingly, the memory of her descendant Rein Gottschall (born in 1876) carried into the 1970s the words and tunes of well over a hundred German chorales, in addition to many Methodistic choruses.

Both his voice and that of Mennonite song leader James Derstine (also born in 1876) remain with us on audiotape, the latter's enfeebled by age. They evoke a generous love for their fund of songs, often connected in memory with some passage of our local church history, or with their own spiritual pilgrimage. Such men were adept at choosing songs that contained echoes of the scriptures or themes they had just heard in the preaching.

In both unison and harmonic modes, the traditional singing had the sound not of performance but of community. People sang in a way that blended rather than individuated their voices. Composer-arranger Alice Parker recalls a vivid first experience of typical Mennonite hymn singing, at Laurelville Mennonite Church Center in July 1961: "In the dining hall, after a brief grace, one voice began a familiar hymn. On the second note, the entire room joined in the most beautiful four-part hymn singing I had ever heard. I hear it in my mind's ear to this day. . . . It had never occurred to me that a tradition of unaccompanied singing, along with a natural, free vocal production and a love for and understanding of the text, could add up to the kind of sound I heard."[3] This experience was a creative watershed for Parker, echoing through the next decades of her nationwide teaching career.

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Preaching

Even as the ministers walked in and seated themselves along the long preachers' bench or pulpit *(Bredigerschtuhl)*, they did so with bowed heads, without looking out over the gathering. If—after they had hung their black, broad-brimmed hats on a row of pegs above their bench—a late-arriving ordained man joined them, he would move along the bench, to be greeted sequentially with a holy kiss by each colleague. It was a solemnly visualized tableau of Gemeinschaft reaching beyond the local congregation into the broader fellowship of likeminded Christians. The presence of visiting *fremder Brediger* always added enjoyment, as witnessed by my grandmother's favorable references to "strange preachers" in the first three decades of her English diary of 1911–52.

When the minister was heard "making the opening," it was in a tone less of summons or announcement than of corporate acknowledgment of God's presence. A congregation of Christ's followers having assembled, a response was now due—the response of worship to an awe-inspiring, gracious God. No rhetorical, liturgical, or architectural flourish was to interpose a

decorative motif on the humble act of gathering. The summons had already been given by Christ; it need not be ornamentally announced. I was sometimes struck by the undemanding, hardly audible opening sentences of initiation, spoken as if the minister didn't mind that it would take awhile for his audience to focus on his familiar, formulaic words.

Several decades ago, I wrote down the formulaic opening phrases one heard ca. 1935–1950 in conservative eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite worship. None of our ministers, whose mother tongue was Pennsylvania German, had gone beyond high school; most had not even that much schooling. The transition to English language (though not to an unaccented pronunciation) was complete in our worship.

> *We greet one and all in the Master's worthy name on this beautiful Lord's Day morning. We trust that each one in divine presence can say with the Psalmist of old, "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord." I believe that should be the testimony of all, when the end of the week comes, and we lay aside our daily cares, and look to our heavenly Father, the one who provides for our needs, and the one to whom one day every knee shall bow, and render a full account of the deeds done in the body.*
>
> *This is surely a sobering thought, when we think of the responsibility that is placed upon us. And as we look to the Lord for a message, we crave an interest in your prayers, that we may be given liberty to declare the whole counsel of God, without fear or favor of men, to a lost and dying world. And that all that is said and done here today may be to the honor and glory of Almighty God. As our mind went back during the past week, over many precious scriptures, we were made to think how often the Lord reminds us of what he expects of his children. How great a love he has shown toward the children of men, and yet, how often his love is rejected, as our minds become filled with the things of this passing world. Beloved, my hope and prayer this morning is that we may*

hearken unto the voice of our Lord, while it is called today. I would like to call your attention to the fifth chapter of . . .

At this point there would be an audible riffling of Bible pages—of thin "India paper"—that served to unite the conscientious part of the congregation in a common experience of scripture, as it reminded others of their marginal status.

I cannot claim that the content of such preaching itself laid strong hold on the hearts of my generation. Our fellowship might be said to have survived, where it did, almost in spite of the rhetorical quality of our pulpit fare. This is to say that we experienced in our worship much more than the virtues of a good speaker. When the speaker was good, we were grateful. But the selection of men to be placed "in the lot" for this office had traditionally centered much more on whether a man would "make himself useful" than on his ability *(fähigkeit)*—the key requirement advanced in 1847 by John H. Oberholtzer, proponent of the progressive wing that became the new Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Conference (and eventually the General Conference Mennonite Church).

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The preaching was not given to self-reference, humor, or compliments to the audience. Illustrations were welcome, if used sparingly. Preachers could be loudly declamatory, but were better received, in the long run, if their sermons came "*so wie 'n landrehe*"—like a gentle summer rain.[4] Often there was what struck visitors as a melancholy tone—resonant with the seriousness of spiritual issues, the memory of persecution, the loss of children to the encroaching world. That tone had been prominent in the incantatory mode, still practiced today by the Amish, the fading echoes of which I heard in our Mennonite congregations of the 1930s and '40s. In the 1980s, long after that mode had become a curious (if not comic) memory, an old layman of our community could still imitate it as practiced by a bishop who had died in 1937.

The sermonic content, expected to be thoroughly scriptural, was laced with what the audience already knew of the biblical narratives. For example, at funerals the Amish preacher begins with creation, musing with existential feeling on the primeval fellowship God had with Adam and Eve, into whom were infused the divine breath that is still sustaining both preacher and congregation. At communion the salvation story is relived across the biblical span. "He had one text," it was said of a local bishop ordained in 1906: "the whole Bible." This pattern contrasted with what our plain people observed about the preachers of the "church people" *(Kariche Leit)*, their Lutheran and Reformed neighbors: "*Sie hen drei punkte k'hatt*" (they had three points).

In our fellowship it was normal for beginning preachers to struggle almost painfully before a sympathetic audience. A woman at Weaverland in Lancaster County stated, "It takes ten years to make a preacher." In fact, if a newly ordained one came on immediately with ease or eloquence in the pulpit, it could raise the suspicion that he was motivated by the willful preaching spirit *(brediger geist)* rather than humble obedience to the call.

Of course a spiritual price could be paid when the preacher never grew into maturity in his function. Expressions of dismay and the record of departing families remain in my congregation's anecdotal memory. One of our old ministers remarked regretfully about a pulpit colleague, "He never could handle a text." In contrast, one of our members somewhat wistfully described a neighboring Dunker preacher as able to "take a text and lay it out." On the other hand, I have found some of the un-eloquent, mnemonic preachers of former decades more quoted in the long run than those who seldom repeated themselves. Today's accomplished pulpit essayists are unlikely to be remembered with the words, "As old ________ used to say . . ."

Indeed, not all memories of typical worship in our local congregations are positive. There was a traditional whispering and otherwise audible socializing among the younger people toward the rear. A nearly unspeakable incident in 1929 (my devout father thought it should not even be recorded) was the accidental discharge of a revolver a young trapper had brought along—during the closing, kneeling prayer. I recall my own discomfort, as a very young preacher in the latter phase of the transitional years,

at not being able to hold the attention of the back third of the audience. This problem disappeared with the advent of families sitting together, after the 1950s. The Old Order Amish meeting in homes frequently make no attempt to keep the young men—who sit closely packed on backless benches—from sleepily resting their heads on the shoulders of those in front of them. Visitors may be surprised to learn that it is not considered proper to stare, even appreciatively, into the eyes of the preacher. This would signify a "bold" rather than a submissive spirit.

Why, in a sense beyond nostalgia, could one feel affection in recalling these odd memories? Is it because residual under the old-fashioned gauche pronunciation, elementary exegesis, intramural atmosphere, and transitional cultural context, there was something profound? Was it the afterglow of the radical sense of community in Christ that had imprinted the gathering of our world-forsaking fellowship in its birth phase four centuries earlier? Was there in our weekly regathering in itself a feeling of sacrament? In an era of replaceable covenants, have the tastefully superior symbolisms we are conscientiously borrowing for our corporate worship been able to equal that pleasure?

Notes

[1] I have written elsewhere on the general subject of Mennonite traditions in worship: "How to Have a Good Worship Experience," *Gospel Herald* (19 March 1991), 1–3; "Glimpses of 'Swiss' Anabaptist-Mennonite Worship," in *Anabaptist Currents: History in Conversation with the Present,* ed. Carl F. Bowman and Stephen L. Longenecker ([Camden, ME?]: Penobscot Press, 1995), 83–100; "'Only a House . . . Yet it Becomes': Some Mennonite Traditions of Worship Space," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 73 (April 1999): 235–56.

[2] Elias N. Landis, MS notes for the funeral sermon of Henry M. Clemmer, Harleysville, PA, 28 November 1936; photocopy in author's possession. Landis and Clemmer were both ministers of the Salford Mennonite congregation.

[3] Alice Parker, "Singing Mennonites: A Vision for Congregational Music," *Builder: An Educational Magazine for Congregational Leaders* (August 1995), 14–15.

[4] From Amos B. Hoover, Old Order Mennonite deacon and historian.

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