From bishops to bureaucracy
Observations on the migration of authority

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Bishops haven't been the most popular authority figures in Mennonite history.[1] In 1821, a Mennonite deacon was still grumbling about "that old man [Hans] Tschantz," one of the earliest bishops in colonial North America who, the deacon complained, had arrived with "a letter from the men in Germany in which they warned [Tschantz] that he was not to start up" anything new in the immigrant church. And at the end of the nineteenth century, well-known Indiana evangelist and editor John S. Coffman—himself the son of a Virginia bishop—labeled Lancaster, Pennsylvania, bishops the "Lancaster Sanhedrin" because he considered them an obstruction to progressive church work.[2] At the same time, other Mennonites carry warm memories of bishop leaders who were important mentors and gentle guides.[3]

Positive or negative, most current appraisals of bishops' authority draw on distant memories or secondhand accounts, because few Mennonites have any recent or direct encounters with an active bishop.[4] Only one district conference in Mennonite Church USA (and none in Mennonite Church Canada) recognizes the office in its polity.[5] Indeed, what is perhaps more intriguing than bishops' historical exercise of power is the rather sudden disappearance of the office after 1954 with remarkably little fanfare, surely one of the more significant—if unexplored—developments in twentieth-century Mennonite Church life. While examination of all the dynamics behind this demise stretches beyond the scope of this essay, the transformation of authority represented by the traditional bishop, and its migration elsewhere, is one place to begin considering some twentieth-century organi-

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Traditional office, relational authority

Traditionally, Mennonite Church leadership authority was lodged in established offices. Perhaps enhanced by personal charisma, authority was never defined by or dependent on such individual qualities.[6] Typically, through a process of drawing lots that was believed to reveal divine preference, congregations "made a bishop" (or minister or deacon) by placing someone in an office.

The office of bishop, in particular, held significant authority, but not because bishops held exclusive claims to independent power. (Mennonite history is strewn with silenced, defrocked, and excommunicated bishops.) Rather, the critical importance of bishops lay in their authority to baptize and preside at communion. The power to perform these rituals of initiation and reaffirmation of community—matched by the ability to withhold them—was essential to transform a collection of individuals into a visible, corporate body.[7] Thus, in ways less often recognized from a twenty-first century perspective, bishop authority was deeply relational in nature, because the church existed only through participation in rites that came through the hand of a particular person, in a context where both parties were known. Church could not be abstract or impersonal.

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Moreover, bishops' relationships with one another constituted the sum of the wider church. Members in one place were connected to those elsewhere to the degree that the bishop with whom they interacted maintained a positive relationship with other bishops. The structures known as district conferences were nothing more or less than gatherings of ordained leaders who met to reaffirm reciprocal recognition of one another's ritual work.[8] When the bishops returned home from conference, they carried that unity with them, distributing it as they shared communion and baptized. Thus, the bishop (and to a lesser extent, other ordained leaders)

represented the church as something larger than the local worshiping group and mediated that larger sense via face-to-face and highly personal ritual interaction with every local member. (Old Order Mennonites still describe this understanding and display this pattern of leadership.)

Bishops held other, auxiliary responsibilities that varied somewhat from place to place.[9] But in the end, bishops were important because the office corresponded with—indeed, called into being—a church that existed locally and across space through their ritual work and relationships. Polity served the sacramental needs of these notions even as it included elements of hierarchy and differentiation.

The priesthood of all believers and the critique of all leadership

At midcentury, new demographic and ideological currents began reshaping Mennonite understandings of leadership, polity, and authority. Certainly by the 1960s, some of this unsettledness was shared with a broader Western cultural suspicion of traditional authority that was peaking just then among politicians, students, and activists of various stripes. But the Mennonite variety also had clear indigenous roots that predated the popular drive to mistrust anyone over thirty.

First, the relational authority and polity embodied by bishops in older Mennonite communities lacked the flexibility to adapt to the new, more expansive post-war Mennonite world. Vigorous domestic mission work and the parallel movement of rurally reared Mennonites to urban areas produced a dramatic increase in the number of new, often isolated congregations outside traditional Mennonite orbits. Detractors decried nonresident bishops who popped into town for a semiannual communion service only to disappear again for six months.[10] Moreover, many of these congregations found themselves in a new sort of relational subordination: conference subsidies of salaries and rents for young churches produced dependency apart from any relationships their bishop might cultivate or neglect. A polity that at its best had been an expression of ritual reciprocity now became, at its most efficient, management from afar.

By themselves, such changes were significant enough, but they were seconded by a number of key theological developments.

Since the early 1940s, the so-called recovery of the Anabaptist vision had animated Mennonite intellectual life, and the quest to recapture the sixteenth century as a model for the twentieth soon took on a life of its own. Especially among the generation coming of age just after World War 2, and often focused in the publications of the so-called Concern movement, Mennonite academics argued that the faithful church needed to take the primitive New Testament church and first-generation Anabaptists as normative models. The movement's appeals were many, including its earnest desire for church renewal and its apparently homegrown character. Advocates sought to strip away the accretions of tradition and outer forms and restore the original "essence" of primitive Anabaptism (and, by extension, the New Testament church). Traditional structures adapted over time held dubious distinction in this scheme and were seen as necessary evils to be grudgingly endured or as marks of decline to be dismissed.[11]

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One of the ways such ideas gained broader academic and popular currency was through the language of the priesthood of all believers—a Reformation-era expression which Mennonites now began to use as shorthand for the notion that all church members possess ministerial gifts of equal significance. Especially in the writings of theologian John Howard Yoder, the priesthood of all believers became an important mark of the faithful church. The apostle Paul, Yoder argued, presented a vision of universal ministry. Every Christian was a minister, so there was little room for differentiated leadership roles that reserved certain ritual authority for a few.[12]

Toward new models—and some second thoughts

These demographic developments and intellectual interests converged in a major 1955 study conference on Church Organization and Administration. Sponsored by the Mennonite Church's Ministerial Committee, the gathering aimed at a "rethinking of our total ministerial organizational arrangement." An opening presentation on recent biblical scholarship concluded that no prescribed polity could be drawn from the apostolic church, an

observation that could have freed consultation attendees to focus on the particularities of their own tradition's historical development and social contexts—except for the fact that the gathered Mennonites wanted to emulate a first-generation movement.[13]

Making this case most strongly at the consultation was sociologist and Concern movement advocate Paul Peachey, who contrasted the "inner essence" of the church with its later "external form." This essence—which Peachey took to be egalitarian and democratic—was what the Anabaptists had realized. "Visible structures of authority which transcend the local group" may seem, in the short run, to hold some practical advantages, Peachey warned, but "practice must ever flow spontaneously," and the acceptance of any "temporal power structures" is always a sign of spiritual weakness.[14]

In this context, bishops clearly were problematic figures who represented specialized leadership and an authority that, while relational, was not egalitarian. In 1952, South Central Conference pioneered a restructuring plan that recognized this new way of thinking about church and implemented it two years later.[15] The bishop office was discontinued; all pastors (now to be hired on three-year contracts) could baptize and preside at the Lord's Supper, making each congregation a sacramentally self-sufficient unit. Now connection between congregations came not through the personal interaction of bishops with one another and with those they served but by grouping congregations into new geographic districts for more efficient administration.[16] Each district had a Regional Overseer who would "coordinate church programs," communicate conference business, and attend biannual meetings of the conference executive committee. Efforts were also underway to have the conference incorporated (1957) and to hire a general secretary (later termed conference minister) to handle administrative work (1959). Other MC area conferences soon imitated this pattern.[17]

Meanwhile, theological education was evolving in ways that downplayed the notion that authority resided in designated leadership offices.[18] By 1967, the Mennonite Church publicly went on record as wondering whether ordination should be abandoned, because it served only to introduce unhealthy differentiation into what should be an egalitarian church.[19] Either way,

"The image of the pastoral office is presently very fluid," the report concluded. Perhaps "for the sake of the larger [ecumenical] church unity, it seems wise to retain the word 'ordination,'" but then "ways will need to be found to shift its meaning to align with our beliefs"—beliefs that were, of course, of relatively recent vintage.[20]

But if "church" was now understood in more congregational and democratic terms, the work of the church seemed increasingly programmatic and bureaucratic.[21] Ironically, laicization often produced professionalization rather than egalitarianism, as special-purpose agencies and institutions assumed the task of embodying the church. Power and authority in such places was limited by charters, job descriptions, and even public law and licensure. Administrators were accountable to boards and constituencies, although such relationships were complicated by the demands of prudent public relations and determined development work. If these institutions knew that they were not exactly "the church," they often were expected to speak as or for the church, and their administrators became authoritative voices on churchly concerns.[22]

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Perhaps it is not surprising that one who missed much of this churchly transformation was among the first to question some aspects of its wisdom. Living in Europe for most of the 1960s and early 1970s, theologian Marlin E. Miller returned to North America to play a leading role in Mennonite ministerial education, eventually heading Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. In a series of essays and public presentations, Miller argued for the importance of recognized "offices" of leadership that carry authority, in some sense, different from other "spiritual gifts" present in the local church.[23]

Miller also explored the history of the idea of the priesthood of all believers, discovering that it was a minor part of the Anabaptist repertory and referred only to the "moral quality" of the church's life. "Apparently neither Menno [Simons] nor other Anabaptists and Mennonites of the [sixteenth century] related the

question of Christian ministry or the appointment and ordination of ministers in the church to the priesthood of all believers," Miller concluded.[24] During the 1980s and early 1990s, Miller's influence—while not singular—was important in shaping the wording of Article 15, "Ministry and Leadership" in *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.[25] That text balances general empowerment with the conviction that "God calls particular persons in the church to specific leadership ministries and offices." What long-term influence this statement may have remains to be seen, especially in a churchly and wider cultural context in which the midcentury critique of leadership remains rather resilient.

Contemporary considerations

The implications of the shifts and reactions noted above are complex enough to warrant more reflection than is possible here.[26] In lieu of systematic analysis, I offer observations on the challenges these changes have bequeathed us.

Challenges for current leaders. If banishing bishops empowered local pastors—and even laity, in some places—to perform all the church's sacred rites, that new authority may now take a more tenuous form. Greater latitude in baptizing and offering the Lord's Supper has often paralleled a more individual and subjective understanding of these rituals, which may not enhance the pastor's role as an instrument of God's grace and hardly communicates a sense of the ministry's representing the collective church. In 2003, one observer questioned whether "familiarity with pastors [has] gone too far."[27]

Challenges for church structures and bureaucracies. Conference ministers have become an important professional resource for pastors charting these newer courses, but conference ministers fill a role decidedly different from that of bishops. Conference ministers do not possess the sort of relational authority through which bishops embodied and mediated a wider church. Conference ministers' authority, defined in detailed job descriptions, is limited to specific tasks (although their workload may be enormous!). A sense of the church as something beyond the local congregation is borne less by relational rituals and more by constitutions, delegate assembly resolutions, incorporated agencies, and alumni loyalty. While these are hardly bad things, it

remains to be seen whether they possess both a transcendence and an immediacy that can bear churchly identity over time.

Challenges for Mennonite unity and identity. The changes of the past century have highlighted the increasing significance of money as a measure of Mennonite identity. If bishops focused church unity and accountability through their authority to cement sacramental relationships, Mennonites in a post-bishop world are more likely to express identity and mark accountability in ways that involve dollars. Which institutions do you or your congregation support financially? Where is giving directed? From whom can you withhold funds? Whom do you turn to for assistance with problems because it's in their salaried contract? One of the best ways to track contemporary Mennonite identity is to follow the money.

Bishops of earlier eras didn't have these instruments of power— no institutional budgets, no alumni associations, no paid staff, no church funds to forward as a sign of support or to withhold in protest. Instead, they had a set of face-to-face ceremonies that involved some water and some bread and wine. Nineteenth-century Mennonite and Amish discussion of church unity (sometimes contentious, to be sure) revolved around acceptance of one another's baptisms and mutual participation in the Lord's Supper. That late-twentieth-century Mennonites often assumed such ritual reciprocity and yet still needed to invest much energy in the process of denominational integration signals something of the changes that have marked Mennonite understandings of identity and the power and authority of relational rituals.

I trust these reflections are not a nostalgic paean to the days when more Mennonite bishops walked the earth. Nor do I want to disparage the important work of administration and church-related institutions. Instead, I want to highlight the contingent nature of the best of human efforts to direct the course of change, and underscore the fact that any democratization of churchly power is less cause for triumphal celebration than reason to notice that new rounds of discernment and refinement are as necessary as ever.

Notes
[1] The focus here is the former Mennonite Church (MC), an antecedent of Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada. After 1897, the MC branch of

Mennonitism brought together most so-called Old Mennonites and progressive Amish Mennonites. However, the bishop office was recognized in other Mennonite branches; see the article "Elder" by Cornelius Krahn in *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, on bishops in the "Russian Mennonite" tradition (in both South Russia and North America). Harold S. Bender, "Bishop," *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, summarizes the terms used for this office and identifies North American groups that recognized it.

[2] David J. Rempel Smucker (introduction and transcription) and Noah G. Good (translator), "Church Practices of Lancaster Mennonites: Writings by Christian Nissley (1777–1831)," *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage* 13 (July 1990): 7; John S. Coffman to Menno S. Steiner, 11 July 1894, John S. Coffman Papers, Hist. MSS 1–19, Archives of the Mennonite Church USA, Goshen, Ind.

[3] Robert J. Baker, "My Good Bishop," *Gospel Herald,* 24 February 1987, 126–27. Baker paid tribute to David A. Yoder (1883–1980), longtime bishop in the Elkhart, Indiana, area. Moreover, in some other Christian traditions, bishops are regarded as liberators, not oppressors (e.g., Bishop Richard Allen [1760–1831] of the African Methodist Episcopal Church or Bishop C. H. Mason [1866–1961] of the Church of God in Christ). This is also the case in many of the African Instituted/Independent Churches (AICs) with which Mennonites have fruitfully partnered in recent decades.

[4] In 1996 (the last year for such published data), the former Mennonite Church (MC) had 125 living bishops, but most were inactive and almost 60 percent were over age 70. See *Mennonite Yearbook: 1997* (Scottdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1997), 214–16.

[5] Lancaster Conference. *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership* (Newton, Kans.: Faith and Life Press, 1996) recognizes oversight ministries, but these differ from the traditional bishop office.

[6] But an individual leader's tenure in an office was contingent on ethical behavior.

[7] This is not to say that nineteenth-century Mennonites defined church merely as the place where the sacraments are rightly rendered. However, it is clear that all the themes and elements they associated with being the people of God (proper personal and group ethics, church discipline, separation from the world, etc.) found their focus in preparation for and participation in these rituals that came only from the hand of a bishop—and through which one was connected to any other Mennonites whose bishop was in fellowship with one's own.

[8] Sometimes this agreement paralleled written agreements ("rules and discipline") that summarized certain understandings, but such documents were never comprehensive. Until the mid-twentieth century, conferences were understood to be comprised of ordained leaders, not congregations. To illustrate: A congregation, as such, could not be expelled from a conference, because it was not a member of a conference. Only an ordained leader could be expelled from a conference. (Congregational members could, however, by participating in communion with or receiving baptism from a bishop who was no longer in conference fellowship, in effect separate themselves from those whose relationships remained "in the conference.") Only in the 1950s were some MC area conferences beginning to talk about local congregations as members of the conference; see explicit statements in this regard in *Church Organization and Administration: Proceedings of the Study Conference . . . held at Chicago, Illinois, March 28–29, 1955* (Scottdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing house, 1955), 36–37.

[9] In some places, bishops performed other functions, such as collectively making up the conference executive committee. In certain cases, deference dictated that the longest-serving bishop was the conference moderator.

[10] *Church Organization and Administration*, 2.

[11] J. Lawrence Burkholder, "Concern Pamphlets Movement," in *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. 5.

[12] E.g., *The Fullness of Christ: Paul's Vision of Universal Ministry* (Elgin, Ill.: Brethren Press, 1987), much of which was taken from material in *Concern* pamphlet no. 17 (1969); and *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 22–26. See also a popularized version in Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1978), 287–88.

[13] *Church Organization and Administration*, 1, 3–12.

[14] Ibid., 19–34. These ideas gained a wider hearing; Peachey's essay was cited with approval several months later at a similar General Conference Mennonite Church study conference. See *Proceedings of the Study Conference on the Believers' Church, held at . . . Chicago, Illinois, August 23–25, 1955* (Newton, Kans.: Mennonite Press, 1955), 135–40.

[15] *Report of the South Central Mennonite Conference*, August 18–21, 1953 (Hutchinson, Kan.), 17–19; *Report of the South Central Mennonite Conference*, August 17–20, 1954 (Eldon, Mo.), 3–4, 25. The reorganization transpired smoothly except in Missouri, where the churches at first resisted the innovation. A majority of the new overseers were former bishops; see "1954–1955 Report of Actions of the Executive Committee for the South Central Mennonite Conference," II-14-2, 2/35, Archives of the Mennonite Church USA, Goshen, Ind.

[16] These administrative districts were different from the older districts that prevailed in eastern conferences such as Lancaster and Virginia. There, a district originally was the name for a sizeable congregation with multiple meeting places. In time, each meetinghouse began hosting weekly worship, and people began to think of each meetinghouse as a distinct church, although with the memory—conscious or not—that the entire district should operate in concert. The newer districts had quite the opposite origin: congregations without a specifically shared history were now grouped together.

[17] Indeed, at the 1955 MC study conference, the opening "Statement of the Problem" and concluding "Suggested Pattern as a Goal for the Mennonite Church" were both presented by South Central ministers, suggesting that the rest of the denomination was looking to them as a model.

[18] See Ross T. Bender, ed., *The People of God: A Mennonite Interpretation of the Free Church Tradition* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1971), which summarizes the findings of the 1960s Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries Dean's Seminar on the shape of theological education. See esp. 153–56; here the document suggests that "the concept of ordination" may need to be "dropped altogether."

[19] *Proceedings of Mennonite General Conference*, 1967 (Lansdale, Pa.), 82–83; *Reports of Mennonite General Conference*, 1967 (Lansdale, Pa.), 108–109.

[20] The echoes of such sentiments were still present in the influential Mennonite Church General Assembly study document (1979) and Summary Statement (1981) *Leadership and Authority in the Life of the Church*. These pieces seem intent on upholding a notion of ministerial office, but the text often bears a reactionary tone that sounds more like the voices of the previous decades. Marlin E. Miller, recently returned to North American from Europe, was instrumental in drafting these two documents, and they may well illustrate a chapter in his evolving thought on these matters, discussed below. (Observation of Barbara and James Nelson Gingerich, who heard Miller present at Assembly Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind., much of the material in the study document as Miller was working with it in the late 1970s.)

[21] The desire for efficiency—an impulse not surprising in the era of the 1950s "Organization Man"—comes through strongly in the documents and directives of the 1955

study conference and the 1954 South Central Conference reorganization scheme.

[22] See some of the challenges described in the July 1997 issue of *Mennonite Quarterly Review* devoted to church-related institutions.

[23] See his autobiographical reflections in "Some Reflections on Pastoral Ministry and Pastoral Education," in *Theology for the Church: Writings by Marlin E. Miller*, ed. Richard A. Kauffman and Gayle Gerber Koontz (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1997), 121–24.

[24] *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. 5., s.v. "Priesthood of All Believers."

[25] A personal story from summer 1994 illustrates this. I was collating and summarizing responses to the draft proposal of *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* for Miller. One afternoon, I met Miller, just off the plane from Africa and eager to hear the emerging shape of the response to the confession draft. I told him that a significant number of readers were upset about the article on leadership. He laughed and said, "Good!" Someone listening asked why he was happy that readers were upset. He replied, "Because that means they understand it and realize that this is pointing us in a new direction."

[26] Especially important to consider in this mix would be the influence of the charismatic movement on Mennonite notions of spiritual authority and power.

[27] Tim Schultz, "Should You Call your Pastor Joe?" *The Mennonite*, 21 October 2003, 14–15.

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