Mennonite repertoires of contention: church life in Steinbach, Manitoba and Quellenkolonie, Chihuahua, 1945-1975

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Main content

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This paper examines conflict within a small Manitoba Mennonite church, the Kleine Gemeinde of the Steinbach district. It focuses on a post World War II division in that church between young evangelicals and older communitarians. As a result of that division a conservative remnant of the Kleine Gemeinde moved to Mexico in 1948 where it founded the Quellenkolonie at Los Jagueyes. During the next decade this colony and the Manitoba church, renamed Evangelical Mennonite Church in 1952, experienced an increasing antipathy to one another. The paper argues that despite division, migration, schism and clearly biased historical representation, conflict did not detract from true Mennonitism: teachings of separation from the world and humility, a lay-church polity and tightly knit community. Moreover, conflict served to bolster a sense of Mennonite identity. Using Charles Tilly's paradigm, "repertoires of contention," it appears that Mennonites used a supply of learned ways to express disapproval, manage conflict or make claims on other people. Those learned ways included migration, the brotherhood meeting, schism and literary representation.

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This is a study of the role that conflict plays in an evolving Mennonite identity. Conflict itself is not a new subject of study. Most histories of Canadian Mennonite groups, for example, derive from a schism or a migration following a confrontation. Any history of Ontario Mennonites would be incomplete without allusion to a series of divisions during the late nineteenth century, "the net effect" of which, writes Frank Epp, was 3400 Mennonites worshipping in 93 different congregations. Most histories of Manitoba Mennonites detail five major schisms of the 1880s and 1890s that brought to the province a bewildering array of new church names--Chortizer, Sommefelder, Holdeman, Bruderthaler, Brudergemeinde--to add to the existing Kleine Gemeinde, Bergthaler and Reinlaender categories. (1) Leland Harder's study, "Steinbach and Its Churches," identifies 14 schisms behind this Manitoba town's various Mennonite churches. (2) And one cannot read Canadian Mennonite literature, especially works by Rudy Wiebe, Pat Friesen and Di Brandt, without being introduced to an assortment of bitter and brutal patriarchal power plays in both household and congregation. (3)

These illustrations of conflict tend to possess two characteristics. First, conflict is represented as event-based; it occurs occasionally as a specific moment of crisis, a time of schism or of shunning, in an otherwise peaceful unfolding of the Mennonite story. Second, conflict is assumed to undermine a healthy social dynamism and lead to community failure. In conflict the church strays from the core of Mennonite belief, away from ideals of peace-loving forebears and from the ideal of a nurturing community. Schism itself is reported, of course, but as a Tauferkrankheit, the Anabaptist sickness, an unfortunate attribute of sectarianism.

This paper suggests that conflict has been represented too negatively, that is, as antithetical to true Mennonitism and as an evil specter in the community. There is, however, another way to read conflict. First, conflict can be understood as endemic and ongoing in Mennonite community, functioning simultaneously at several levels: between the community and its host society, among Mennonite sub-communities,...
78 According to a 1945 work, the Mennonites were viewed in such a favorable light that the governors of different Mexican states were “outdoing” each other in trying to attract Mennonites to settle in their respective states. Fretz, Mennonite Colonization, p. 33. 79 Hall, Power, p. 27. Hall’s source: Department of Labor to Secretariat of Industry and Commerce, March 28, 1921. AGN-Department of Labor, vol. 334, exp. 23. 80 “Ya no habrá más contratos de Colonización nominales,” El Universal (Mexico City), May 19, 1922, p. 1. Mennonite Church USA. Chapter · January 2004 with 5 Reads. How we measure ‘reads’. Some scholars, however, speak of a repositioning of the Christian churches in post-modern Europe, citing new forms of religious life and community. This book [Show full abstract] focuses on the complex mutations the Christian churches in Western Europe have experienced since World War II. The authors offer a comparative exploration of the situations in several countries and describe the evolution (including the specific growth and decline) of the various Christian denominations. Read more. Article. Enhancing the sermon: the effect of Willow Creek’s homiletical drama in free church wo