

How have we dealt with conflict in the past?

*Presented to the General Council of Mennonite World Conference
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, USA, July 2015
By Alfred Neufeld of Paraguay*

Introduction

As a global Mennonite family we are entering the last decade toward celebrating 500 years of Anabaptism and 100 years of Mennonite World Conference in 2025.

It might be one of the present day miracles of the grace of God that our global, but very pluralistic community has been able to find ways of staying united for such a long time. Our theology and our structure do not help: We have no global centre of church authority, since each national church or alliance is autonomous. We have no historic or present-day unified Confession of Faith, but just recently some eclectic “Shared Convictions.”

Ethno Germanic identity with Low German, Pennsylvania Dutch and the famous “Mennonite game” of linking family and relatives, as well as a common experience of persecution, social marginalization and limited civil and religious rights provided some network for connections. But in the last 100 years, “Mennonite culture,” “Mennonite food” and “Mennonite dialect” exploded from the Swiss and Dutch-Prussian-Russian culture to almost 100 different Mennonite culture, food, and language traditions.

There were Mennonite times when older people and “elders” held strong authority and were considered the bearers of identity. But that changed drastically already in the early 1920s and definitely with the student revolution 1968. Today we all are aware that if we are not able to articulate our theology and identity in a relevant way for the emerging and digitalized generation, there will be no future for Mennonite World Conference.

As soon as persecution and marginalization ended, Mennonites have identified quite strongly with their surrounding national culture. Separation from the world became a complicated topic. Identification with national political projects was tempting again and again. The tragic historical result was that Mennonites with different nationalistic projects sometimes found themselves, weapons in hand, confronting each other on battlefields in World War I and II.

As Karl Barth quite eloquently has shown, and Friedrich Schleiermacher tried to reconcile, revivalist Pietism and enlightenment Liberalism had more in common than they ever were ever willing to admit. In Mennonite history these two probably have been the strongest theological tendencies, impacting the core of original 16th century Anabaptist theological heritage. And of course, up to this day both movements and tendencies are well and alive in Mennonite World Conference. Often, these seemingly diametrically opposite poles have caused a considerable amount of anxiety, frustration, and misunderstandings. The strong tendency of some national churches to identify with the ecumenical movement as articulated by the World Council of Churches while others identify with the inter-church fraternity as articulated by the World Evangelical Alliance or other similar networks, is an area that requires a high amount of Christian maturity and biblical tolerance in order to keep the family together and to manage the destructive potential for all kind of conflicts.

Of course, many other topics in the past have challenged our unity in the Spirit: women in ministry, the whole gender debate, capitalism versus socialism, colonialism versus emancipation between North and South, spirituality of high liturgy versus Pentecostal charismatic free spirituality, rich churches versus poor churches, lay ministry versus professional theologians, Swiss Anabaptism versus Dutch North German Anabaptism, a united Anabaptist vision versus a heterogeneous polygenesis Anabaptist heritage, social Gospel versus “soul saving” Gospel, premillennialism versus amillennialism, “pacifism” as overall Mennonite identity versus “missional church” as identity marker. And the list could go on.

As I study the history of our Anabaptist fraternity and admire the life of the founding fathers and mothers of Mennonite World Conference, I discover much wisdom in their way of dealing with conflict and holding the family together.

I. Ethnic versus missional church

In the late 19th century most European countries held to blood and racial theories and the superiority of Germanic European descent toward other racial groups in Asia, Africa and Latin America. This soil and blood ideology, present long before Adolf Hitler's political and anti-Semitic project, tended to be closely linked to Nationalism, national pride and national identity.

Swiss as well as Dutch-Prussian-Russian Mennonites through their marginalization and migrations had become "world citizens." In the Netherlands quite early they got equal civil rights and integrated strongly into Dutch society, without necessarily falling into an ethno-centric worldview. Things took a different course with Mennonites in Prussia, and later in Russia, Canada, and Paraguay. When German and Prussian Mennonites recovered complete civil rights and religious freedom under Bismarck and the emerging German Reich/Empire, they became eager to identify as much as possible with Germanic national identity, culture, philosophy, German virtues and even the ideology of German blood. Although most Mennonite pastors rejected the attitude, there seems to have been a growing feeling, as the German philosopher Fichte expressed in the 19th century: "Am deutschen Wesen muss die Welt genesen." (The world will just recover from its malaise only by identifying with the German way of being.)

During World War I and the anarchic Bolshevik Revolution that followed, Mennonites in Russia were split over the "Holländerei" versus "Deutschtum." At stake was the question whether their ethnic identity was Dutch or German. B.B. Janz and the more pacifistic branch identified strongly with Dutch identity, as did the later MCC after World War II, which delivered the famous "Mennopass" in the Netherlands for all Russian Low German speaking Mennonites, so these could enter the Netherlands and not be deported by the Red Army.

On the other hand, those impressed by German culture and the German Wehrmacht in World War I and World War II in South Russia strongly identified themselves with Germany. Some of them organized and participated in the self-defence militia ("mennonitischer Selbstschutz") trained by German soldiers. And once the German army entered the Mennonite villages in World War II, the racial militia of Heinrich Himmler recruited most young *and very young [not quite clear]* Mennonite boys into the Waffen SS. When they had to flee two years later to the West, the refugees from Russia in the Polish Warthegau received German citizenship in 1944.

In Germany the Mennonite Historical Society started to specialize on genealogies that were eager to demonstrate good Aryan ancestors and the absence of Jewish and Slavic blood in Mennonite families. When my people escaped from Russia and stayed in the refugee camp of Mölln in March 1930, beloved preacher and teacher Gerhard Schartner stated in his diary that two German doctors took blood samples of everyone. After some days they came with the test results and the good news – all of them had "good Aryan blood".

The year 1936 was decisive in some aspects for the idea of "Mennonite ethno-religious identity". At the third Mennonite World Conference Assembly in Elspeet, Dutch mission experts begin to honour and recover the importance of missions and the Anabaptist idea of being a missional church and a counter cultural church, "because the Gospel always questions our cultures." There also, for the first time, we find a clear public articulation that missions will definitely transform the sending mother churches, since missions never is a one-way road. Here the idea was born that a Mennonite World Conference should not only gather ethnic Mennonites of Central European descent, but that the emerging churches through missions from the South and East should very soon get an equal voice.

In Paraguay the young refugee community of Fernheim in 1932, already two years after their arrival founded a mission agency to reach their neighbouring First Nation people. In India, Indonesia, China, Argentine and several countries of Africa, strong emerging Mennonite churches started to belong to the global Mennonite Commonwealth.

On the other hand, the ethno-religious identity concept also got strong enforcement by some leading Mennonite ideologists. For example, in **19xx**, the schoolteacher Heinrich “Hajo” Schröder published a propagandistic Nazi booklet titled “Russlanddeutsche Friesen”, where he tried to prove that the Friesian descendants of Russian Mennonites belong to a very special and noble category of Aryan blood. His ideas got amazing support in Mennonite newspapers, “Bote” and “Rundschau”. Schröder also inspired the new Paraguayan settlement in East Paraguay, named Friesland, and he was even able to bring 32 young people to Germany in 1938. These at the end were mandated to help Germany win the war.

The famous Professor B.H. Unruh – kind of an intellectual and spiritual father to so many Mennonites in Russia, Germany, Canada, and South America – held strongly to the Germanic thesis of Mennonite identity and would not hesitate to talk about the Mennonite “Volk”: “We have become a cultural and cultic community”. (Wir sind eine Kult- und Kulturgemeinschaft geworden.)

In Germany two newly promoted PhDs Walter Quiring and Fritz Kliewer preferred to talk about Mennonites as German farmers in Russia and Paraguay. Quiring went so far as to affirm publically that “non-Aryan blood is poison” for Mennonite communities.

When the global Mennonite family, meeting in Danzig in 1930, made such extraordinary efforts to provide relief and a new homeland to Russian refugees, the ethnic component was strong. The young Harold S. Bender made public his unbelievable vision of founding a Mennonite republic in Paraguay, where all Mennonites of the world would have enough room to found a nation. Orie Miller, at that time already a mission strategist, once wondered why the same effort was not made for young Mennonites in Indonesia, to which the veteran MB and GC elders B.B. Janz and J.J. Thiessen, replied: “Here we are dealing with “our” people”.

Things changed drastically after World War II, when the Germanic racial project had ended in a public catastrophe. Nevertheless, since then and till today Mennonites continue to be on a long journey of overcoming Germanic ethno-centrism. Mennonite World Conference has been very helpful through its assemblies, its celebrations of diversity, its global sharing and travel fund, its global village etc. to foster the joy of being a very heterogeneous and picturesque global community. But much mutual understanding is still needed.

In Paraguay we have at least 23 different “species” in the Mennonite “zoo”, and several more in the making. These range from six different First Nation Mennonite church associations, to at least 10 different groups of Low German Mennonite immigrant identity, to several Latino Mennonite associations, and even integrated Beachy Amish with Swiss German names like Bontrager and Latino names like González – all in Amish dress – several groups of Old Colony Mennonites with their own dress code, along with some of the wealthiest business men and economic communities well integrated into Paraguayan and global culture. To bring and hold them together is almost a modern day miracle. A Colombian Latino Mennonite once told me how happy they were not to have any immigrant Germanic background Mennonites in their country. That made it so much easier for them to recover authentic Anabaptist identity. To some extent he is right.

In the meantime, Mennonites in Canada, especially in Manitoba, discovered that the federal government was willing to release huge sums of money to investigate and document “ethno-religious” communities. The *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, as well as the chair for Mennonite Studies of University of Winnipeg, has very openly concentrated on Mennonites as an ethno-religious phenomenon. I love to call this the “Manitoba heresy”, but not all agree.

While preparing for Mennonite World Conference in Curitiba, Executive Secretary C. J. Dyck wondered if “fellowship” was strong enough to build global unity in a changing world brotherhood. Dyck was keenly aware of MWC supporters who were concerned by the costs and superficiality of meeting once every five years. Toward the end of his report he observed: “Times have changed. One-third of the Mennonites in the world today are non-white. They do not care much for Luther’s sixteenth century Europe, which ethnic Mennonites consider important.” Then he articulated a more relevant purpose:

“The end of more or less traditional missionary activity is upon us. Nationally independent Mennonite churches in Asia, Africa, and Latin America are looking for new ways of working with and relating to the world brotherhood. If MWC is to continue as a useful instrument in the world brotherhood it must be more than an ethnic gathering to celebrate a great past. It must be part of the mission Mennonites are being called to in his world. Not just white, western Mennonites, but all Mennonites... Unless MWC can become an integral part of what all Mennonites want to be and do in the world it cannot have a real future.”

Changes in organizational representation would have to be made to achieve these new goals. Dyck appealed for “new priorities in our own denominational commitments particularly in the West by increasing financial contributions.” By the end of the report he answered his own question:

“Mennonites around the world need each other to clarify the meaning of faith in their diverse cultural contexts. They need each other to achieve a Believer’s Church identity in the midst of increasingly strong national and economic, and civic religion pressures. They need each other to clarify what it is they have to say in the Seventies, and how, and where to say it.” (John A. Lapp and Ed van Straten, “Mennonite World Conference 1925-2000: From Euro-American Conference to Worldwide Communion” in: *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77, Jan. 2003, 29)

When Dietrich Panna of the Enhlit Mennonite Church at the Mennonite World Conference assembly in Asuncion 2009 publically said that he was proud to be a Mennonite, this was strange and amazing news for Paraguayan society, both for many Mennonites of immigrant background as well as for his own Enhlit community. Up to then the general Paraguayan opinion identified Mennonites with cheese, Old Colony dress code, and Germanic accent.

Several Mennonite groups, in order to become missional churches, have considered dropping of Mennonite name and identity. The Old Mennonite Alliance Church from Russia was even willing, once it moved to North America, to take the path of “leaving Anabaptism” in order to be more biblical and more missional in its perspective. The Mennonite Brethren Church in Canada and the USA, as well as in Brazil – once so eager in their founding days to recover Anabaptist theology and the spiritual heritage of Menno Simons (almost the only Mennonite church group in 1902 to clearly hold to non resistance and Mennonite pacifism in their Confession of Faith, when most of the European Mennonites were on their way to drop this principle) – are today often dropping the name “Mennonite” in favour of some kind of community church marketing label.

As a world communion we face this wonderful challenge to administer the incredible reality that during the 100 years of MWC’s existence we have gone from being a mono-cultural Dutch/Germanic church to become a global family, worshipping and evangelizing in at least 100 languages and ethnic identities.

The fact is, that Edgardo Sánchez, Ditrich Panna, Pakisa Tshimika, Alix Lozano, Tigist Migbar, and Janti Widjaja have become good Mennonite names, best suited to “play the Mennonite game”.

2. War and peace

In 2009 when we organized Assembly 15 in Asunción, the question of security became a controversial issue. The charismatic mega church where we met had their own “Christian” armed security guards and offered them to us for the days of our assembly when so many people would be present. Some of us actually wanted to gather without any security, but others thought that was irresponsible. So I called my friend, a former German police intelligence officer and Mennonite in

good standing with his local church in Neuland, with whom I had had some controversial debates in the past on the issue of armed security and persecution of cattle thieves on Mennonite ranches. He gladly agreed to set up a security system, but one based only on laptops, cameras and walkie-talkies, without any arms and violence. It worked perfectly.

Being a peace church and renouncing armed actions has not been an easy or a cheap issue in Mennonite history. Ever since the trial of Michael Sattler, who was sentenced to a torturous death because he held to the conviction that it is not right for a Christian to take the sword against the Turks, and ever since Menno Simons talked about the difference between the blood of swine and the blood of human beings, and affirmed that the Messianic community of Jesus has transformed swords into ploughshares and is living already the Heavenly Jerusalem in midst of a fallen world, Mennonites have wanted to be the peace church.

But right from the beginning, with Thomas Muenzer and the Peasant War 1525, with the crazy Anabaptist Kingdom in Muenster, with the property limitations and the heavy military taxes which Prussian Mennonites had to pay to the War Academy in Kulm, or ever since German, French and Swiss Mennonites dropped the principle of non-resistance as the price of becoming fully recognized citizens with equal rights in their countries, ever since the "Forsteidienst" in Russia became almost unbearable, demanding so much time and so much money, and after the very sad debacle of the Mennonite "Selbstschutz" in order to fight Bolshevik Anarchism in South Russia, the dream of being a non-violent peace church has been frequently shattered.

After World War II, to be a peace church has again become a core conviction, embraced by most Mennonites of the global family. But more than once Mennonite theologians and pastors have expressed to me their serious concern that in many churches the Gospel and the story of salvation are reduced almost completely to pacifism. More than once in the past Mennonite churches have wondered whether the peace work of MCC was not showing a rather shallow and only horizontal social Gospel.

On the other hand, the new religious evangelical right, especially in North America, is gaining amazing and easy ground in Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren churches, endangering their whole historic identity. The new cruel actions of Islamic terrorism are a critical test for the quality of Mennonite peace convictions based on the Gospel.

The many historical instances where Mennonite churches left the way of peace are lately being recovered and documented. This is important and highly educational. The "Selbstschutz" experience, for example, can teach us important lessons as we face the reality of terrorism. The Prussian-German Bismarck experience, offering national identity to Mennonites, the tragic experience of two brothers and global Mennonite leaders, Benjamin H. Unruh of Karlsruhe and Abram H. Unruh of Winnipeg, losing their sons, one with the German Wehrmacht, the other with the Canadian Royal Air Force – blood cousins and sons of Mennonite preachers confronted in arms! All these are tragic stories which need to be remembered and retold.

Even more terrible is Mennonite participation in the Waffen SS in Prussia and the Ukraine, in the elimination of Jews in Poland and South Russia, in the participation of the concentration camp of Stutthof next to the Mennonite village Stutthof close to Danzig.

When I visited the old Mennonite church in Danzig, where the second Mennonite World Assembly gathered in 1930, I found there a vigorous charismatic, peace oriented independent church, but not one Mennonite anymore. The pastor told me that when they received the church building handed over to them by the Communist government after World War II, there were paintings on the walls with pictures of the high-ranking Mennonite military officers of World War I. They just painted them over. It took the Weierhof church of senior pacifist Christian Neff several decades to do the same with their own war heroes.

How has Mennonite World Conference dealt with these issues? At the Amsterdam assembly in 1936, C. Henry Smith of America and Fritz Kuiper of Holland both predicted with crystalline clarity that in the very near future there would be another big war. And they insisted on the importance of recovering radical Anabaptist pacifism. German Mennonites at that time had serious troubles of identity. Encounters between Mennonites and the Bruderhof, a Christian communal group that emerged in Germany in the 1920s around the leadership of Eberhard Arnold, pushed European Mennonites to clarify their positions. At one gathering, as the records show, Hans Zumpe, a representative of the Bruderhof "...cast a light on the Bruderhof's attitude: renunciation of the world as a timely challenge based on early Anabaptist principles. Brother Dyck... represented the attitude of the German Mennonites, who, along with all sincere Christians, long for peace among the nations, but will still obey their government – also by serving in the military – and will not lag behind their fellow Germans in their readiness for sacrifice..."

On July 4, at Fredeshiem, the Dutch Mennonite Jacob ter Meulen, a friend of Eberhard Arnold, led a delegation in addressing the "political" issues so carefully avoided at the larger conference that had just concluded. By the end of the day the group, which included all of the American Mennonite representatives, several Dutch Mennonites, a Pole, a German, and the two representatives of the Bruderhof, had issued the following joint statement called the "Mennonite Peace Declaration":

"We, the undersigned Mennonites: groups, organizations, and individuals from all over the earth

- trusting in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which calls people to serve the cause of peace and to fight the sin of war
- and convinced that the horrible means and measures of war now being readied in a constantly growing stream by all nations will be judged by God
- challenge the world's Mennonites to fulfill the task entrusted to us by God through the history of our Mennonite forebears, which is the proclamation of the gospel of peace.

We therefore turn to all brothers and sisters in the hope that they will, in every congregation, vigorously witness to our principle of peace and proclaim to the world our readiness for service in the spirit of Christ. We desire to work together so that we might realize this service of love in deed and render spiritual and material help to all those of our brothers who carry the conviction that God has called them to refuse military service, or who might have to suffer on account of their stand for peace."

L. D. G. Knipscheer	P. C. Hiebert	W. Mesdag
Prits Kuiper	Orie O. Miller	J. C. Dirkmast
Harold S. Bender	P. R. Schroeder	Jan Gleysteen
Hans Zumpe	David Toews	C. Henry Smith
C. F. Klassen	Emmy Arnold	T. O. Hylkema
D. Attema	H. Brouwer	J. M. Leendertz
Ter Meulen	Richard Nickel	

This remarkable post-conference meeting received enthusiastic coverage in the American Mennonite press, but was not mentioned in the German *Mennonitische Blätter*. Still, the personal contacts forged and renewed during it proved of crucial importance to the Bruderhof. Two months later, in September 1936, Jacob ter Meulen visited Silum, the Bruderhof's temporary refuge in Liechtenstein, and in 1937, he helped arrange lodging for German Bruderhof members as they fled over the border into Holland. Meeting Harold S. Bender and Orie O. Miller, both leaders of the Mennonite Central Committee in the United States, proved to be equally important. Bender, who had visited the Rhön Bruderhof in 1930, kept abreast of the deteriorating situation of the community under the Nazis and did his best to provide practical help from across the ocean. And in 1940, as the Bruderhof (now in exile in England) sought to leave the Old World altogether, it was Miller who helped facilitate the community's emigration to Paraguay." (Based on the original minutes and documents, copied in Emmy Barth, *No Lasting Home. A year in the Paraguayan Wilderness*. Rifton, New York: Plough Publishing House, 2009, 195-198)

This almost forgotten peace manifesto had strong and helpful consequences. Nazi ideology had painfully divided the Mennonite family in Paraguay, Canada, as well as in Europe. In Paraguay it produced a similar statement of those Mennonites who wanted to hold to non-violence and were

willing to stay in the Chaco, instead of becoming German citizens and going home – “Heim ins Reich”.

Very crucial were the next three Mennonite World Conference assemblies in Goshen/Newton 1948, in Basel/St. Chrischona 1952 and in Karlsruhe 1957, as well as a peace conference at the Thomashof in June 1949. All of them reflect the tensions and the shame about what had happened to the Mennonite family during World War II.

War and Nazi ideology had impacted negatively not only German Mennonites, but also the Dutch: “A number of Mennonites died as a result of the war. A few joined the German army or supported Nazi ideology, and died for that reason. Many more were killed for belonging to resistance groups, were attacked during bombings or perished because of the forced labour they had to do in German factories. According to one estimate, some one hundred Mennonites were among those imprisoned in German concentration camps, and lost their lives there. A commemoration volume of a large, predominantly Christian resistance movement mentions nineteen names of Mennonites in its obituary list. Several Dutch Mennonites lost their lives in Japanese prison camps in Indonesia or because their ship was torpedoed or bombed, as happened to the German missionaries Hermann Schmitt and Otto Stauffer near Sibolga, North Sumatra.” (Claude Baecher, *Testing Faith and Tradition: Europe. A Global Mennonite History*. Kitchener: Pandora Press 2006, 85)

European Mennonites, especially the Dutch and the Germans, have told their story with impressive sincerity. Moving is the incident of a Prussian/German Mennonite army officer, invading a Mennonite family home in Dutch Leeuwarden. Because of war there was no food anymore, but he was preparing his meal before the eyes of the hungry children.

“With his own frying pan, a chunk of bacon, and two eggs in his hand, he got busy. In no time, the room filled with a delicious, almost forgotten aroma. No one said a word. The man felt the quiet and looked up to see us all watching him, mesmerized. He stood straight up, pulled out his pistol, and turned a full circle. He saw our surprised and frightened faces, screamed, and dashed out of the room. We heard him crying in the hall. I went out to him. He was crouching in the corner behind the door, crying his eyes out....and when he saw only innocent, frightened faces, something snapped inside him. He saw his home in us, his village. ‘We are Mennonites and have promised God not to kill,’ he said. I thought it was safe to tell him he had come to a Mennonite parish. ‘Unbelievable’ was the only word he could utter. Deeply moved, we sat there together.” (Ibid, 268-269)

After the war German Mennonites began reflecting on what had happened. Thus began an attitude of repentance and of renewed commitment toward becoming a peace church.

“For many years after the war Mennonites had trouble examining their relationship to the Nazi state. At first they were shocked by the collapse of Germany and had enough to do, simply trying to exist in the horrible and difficult post-war years. A predominant sense was ‘we’ve managed to survive.’ Nevertheless, some began to think through the situation. At the Fourth Mennonite World Conference in 1948, held in Goshen, Indiana, Dirk Cattepoel, pastor in Krefeld, pleaded for forgiveness from the Mennonites present: ‘As a Christian from Germany I would confess with all my heart how deeply it burdens us that so much distress, so much cruelty, and so much destruction has come over others through men of our nation, and I would like to appeal particularly to you, my Dutch and French brothers and sisters: during the years since 1940, terrible things have happened to your people through representatives of mine, so much, that from the human angle forgiveness seems impossible. And yet, for Christ’s sake I ask you: Forgive us! And thus grant us – in the name of Christ – a new beginning of Christian brotherliness.’”

It took thirty years before writings addressing the Nazi past came to be written by German Mennonites; for many this was a very painful process. In 1995 the AMG published a statement marking the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war in Europe and confessed:

“Most Mennonites in Germany gave in to the temptation of National Socialism and sacrificed the peace witness. Very often they valued their commitment to the state higher than their duties to Mennonite brothers and sisters in the Netherlands and France... Nearly all Mennonites remained silent in the face of Nazi crimes against Jews and others... We can only plead for forgiveness with the words of the Lord’s Prayer.” (Ibid, 129-130)

Today we are realizing more and more that it is not enough to be a peace church, but we are called to be a peacemaker church and community. The call of Ron Sider to form Christian Peacemaker Teams at the 1984 MWC assembly in Strasbourg has had a great and wonderful impact, especially among young Anabaptists. But Sider himself lately is calling us to a sound theological balance of being Christ centred and not only peace centred. I still remember hearing him say: “When I visited our Peacemaker Teams in the Middle East, I realized they knew a lot about techniques of peacemaking. But I was worried to see that they didn’t know much about Jesus and how to share his Gospel.”

3. Emerging generation versus leaving generation

There is an emblematic picture taken at MWC Amsterdam 1967. During a break, an elderly Old Mennonite woman with a typical long black dress and devotional covering is seated right next to a 20 year old young woman with mini skirt, high heels and a cigarette. Of course, these were the times of the student revolution, although the topic focussed on the witness of the Holy Spirit.



Nevertheless young Hamburg pastor Hans-Juergen Goertz was given the opportunity to speak about the “Future of the World Mennonite Brotherhood”:

“Where, therefore, the Word of God is fostered among us and the Holy Spirit is given serious attention, there it becomes clear that we are not a finished congregation which has arrived at its ultimate goal but a congregation in the process of becoming what it is intended to become. For this reason we are forced to give up the past interest of Anabaptism in modeling itself after the early church; we are not the early church. Instead we are encouraged to take seriously the eschatological dimensions of Anabaptism which encourages the church to look forward to the Kingdom of God.” (Cornelius J. Dyck, ed. Proceedings of the Eighth Mennonite World Conference. Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Elkhart, Indiana, 1967, 95)

Of course youth work had been an important aspect also in the previous assemblies. At the Basel/Zurich Jubilee of 1925 elderly people prevailed, but already in Danzig 1930 it is amazing to see how many young men like C.F. Klassen and Harold S. Bender exercised impressive leadership and were highly respected by the older generation. Also Amsterdam/Elspeet 1936 featured young leaders like Fritz Kliewer and Fritz Kuiper, the Gemeededag- and the Jugendbewegung as well as a large section about Mennonites and youth. Between 1936 and 1948 it was usually young Mennonites who enthusiastically embraced National Socialism on the one hand and enthusiastically

recovered the Anabaptist vision of non-violence and discipleship on the other hand. After Newton 1948 and Basel 1952, seven young American theologians in Europe – the so-called “Concern Group” – began to question the theology of the aging “Bender/Anabaptist Vision” school. But it was in Amsterdam 1967, under the leadership of young Oskar Wedel, that Mennonite youth formed the so-called “Contact-Committee”.

“Founding of World Mennonite Youth Contact

Young people, who gathered today for an international youth meeting in conjunction with the Eighth Mennonite World Conference in Amsterdam, have decided to found the *World Mennonite Youth Contact*.

Purpose of the *Contact* is to promote a mutual understanding between the Mennonite youth all over the world. The intention is to reach an exchange of thoughts and study materials. The Contact will establish youth programs in collaboration with the Presidium of the World Conferences. These programs will be presented on the next world conference.” (Ibid, 165)

And Helmut Harder states the following:

“The 9th MWC assembly has sometimes been referred to as a meeting that revealed much conflict among participants. The “Conference Message,” adopted at the final session concluded that there does not need to be a rift between those whose priority is personal salvation and those who promote liberation from oppression and injustice. The rich foundational basis laid by way of theological presentations on the topic of reconciliation served the purpose of the conference well, and contributed significantly to a fruitful future for MWC.” (Helmut Harder, unpublished paper read in Chrischona to the Faith and Life Committee, 2012, 5)

And the Anabaptist Wiki states in their article on Mennonite World Conferences:

“The gathering in Curitiba brought the Mennonite World Conference to a crossroad, as some groups boycotted the assembly in protest of the political repression they perceived in the country.”

Oral history has it that some young people at that time, today very respected Mennonite leaders, protested at the closing communion service, requesting a statement of rejection on Brazilian military government.

Young Argentinean psychologist and educator Daniel Schipani gave one of the main addresses titled “Reconciliation as Liberation.” In it he challenged Mennonites to adopt an Anabaptist Liberation Theology:

“All of this involves the need to be informed and to equip oneself according to the possibilities offered by science and technology. And it involves the need to actively commit oneself to service activities and social action in the name of Christ. Perhaps many of us also need to ‘reconcile’ our religious and secular activities, our faith and our political position. In such manner we would have ‘liberated’ ourselves of a certain schizophrenia that tends to keep us divided or ineffective as groups and as a Christian personality.” (Cornelius J. Dyck, ed. *Jesus Christ Reconciles. Proceedings of the Ninth Mennonite World Conference. Curitiba, Brazil, Indiana: Evangel Press 1972, p12*)

Precisely at Curitiba the young people formulated some vigorous recommendations still challenging for today:

“Missions, peace, and evangelism ought to be in conversation with each other... If we want to change structures, are we simply doing what the world does? ... Youth leaders can be key persons in change (USA)... Our parents are not prepared to educate their own youth (North Germany)... Young people have to learn for themselves and not just build up their faith on older fundamentals (Brazil)... Youth leaders have tried to speak with the older generation, but they don’t want to converse (South Germany)... Mennonite World Conference needs adequately trained interpreters to help diminish language problems...”

We suggest that the theme for the next Mennonite World Conference focus on change. We need to grapple seriously with changing structures in society and the church. We need to explore together what new forms and structures need to emerge to contain a continually

renewed and renewing Christian life and witness. We need to look at what change does to relationships between the older and younger generation, between various cultural and ethnic groups. We need to ask the Holy Spirit how we can retain the essence of Christian faith while at the same time having the freedom to abandon old structures and create new ones. We suggest that the theme be stated: 'New Wineskins for New Wine'."

Before the meeting adjourned there were two additional suggestions for continuing relationships across international boundaries.

1. Might it be possible to plan youth leaders' conferences and retreats across international lines even if World Conference should no longer be held?
2. MCC should be encouraged to plan several international youth work camps in South America, Africa and Asia to bring young people from around the world together..." (Ibid, 268-269)

At this moment I don't perceive much tension between generations. But I'm deeply concerned that our younger generation is respectfully withdrawing from a deep identification with Anabaptist identity and our historical movement. This is probably because it doesn't make sense to their technocentric and postmodern environment, or just because other offers in the global Christian "supermarket" are more attractive.

4. Revival Pietism versus Enlightenment Liberalism

Although historic Anabaptism for almost 400 years was isolated to a large extent from the ruling national powers – and isolated itself because of rather literal second generation interpretation of separation from the world – outside movements have always impacted the Mennonite church.

Strangely enough, the two movements with probably the strongest impact have been liberal Rationalism – linked to names as Erasmus, Strauss, Lessing, Kant, Rousseau, Troeltsch, Schleiermacher, Adolf von Harnack, and the World Council of Churches ecumenical movement on the one hand. And, on the other hand, the strong historical impact coming from revivalist Pietism associated with such names as Hans Denck, Spener, Francke, Zinzendorf (and his connections to the Amsterdam Mennonites), Wesley, Spurgeon, Tersteegen, (and his connections to the Mennonite church Krefeld), Eduard Wuest, Oncken, Moody, Samuel Froehlich, Alexander Mack, Billy Graham, the Lausanne movement, and the World Evangelical Alliance.

It might be strange to affirm that the Anabaptist dissent of the 16th century in essence harboured the DNA of both perspectives. On the one hand religious freedom, an emphasis on individualism, practical Christianity, social justice, rejection of a magical sacramental world view, democratic church structures, a non-dogmatic reading of Scripture, a strong attachment to the historical Jesus, pacifism, anti-clericalism, equalitarian society, community of goods, political structures inspired by great humanistic ideals (the bloodless sword of Menno Simons), religious decisions postponed to the age of accountability and not imposed through infant baptism, Jesus as model of true humanity, and other ideas dear to the Enlightenment, and even the French Revolution – all these were at the core of the 16th century Anabaptist movement.

But no doubt, the goals of Pietism and Revivalism were as strongly present in original Anabaptism as in later pietistic and revival movements: the fundamental experience of new spiritual birth, the strong "communio sanctorum" of small base communities like the "colegia pietatis" of Spener, the strong evangelistic and missionary zeal, the assumption that established acculturated Christianity was a mission field in need evangelizing, the prominence of the Holy Spirit and Spirit baptism, the willingness to undergo martyrdom, the radical intervention of supernatural divine powers in individual and communitarian lives, the priority of Biblicism and Bible reading, the rejection of established religious tradition, the centrality of lay ministries, the institution of itinerant preachers and evangelists (Reiseprediger), creative hymnody describing personal spiritual experiences, free non-liturgical prayer and vivid communitarian prayer meetings, a very uninhibited testimonial

language about conversion experiences – all these are 16th century Anabaptist elements found again in the later pietistic and revival traditions.

Obviously, when celebrating 400 years of Anabaptism in 1925 some Mennonite churches, especially in Northern Europe and some General Conference churches in America, had identified quite strongly with rational Liberalism. The Dutch Mennonites spoke freely, with great honesty and confidence about this in the Assemblies 1925, 1930 and 1936. Nikolai Siemens, first editor of the *Mennoblatt* in Paraguay, travelled in 1930 through the Mennonite communities in West and East Prussia up to Koenigsberg. In his diary he reported his surprise at finding Mennonite pastors in the old city of Kant, who would deny the virgin birth, physical resurrection and the deity of Jesus. In 1930 French and Swiss Mennonites were hesitant to participate in the Danzig assembly, considering that the Mennonites gathered there have a “different Christ”. And Harold S. Bender, travelling with the wise Christian Neff to Amsterdam to prepare the Third Assembly of Mennonite World Conference wondered what to do with Dutch and North German “unbelieving” Mennonites, and what a hard time he would have explaining his fellowship with “not born-again Mennonites” to his Old Mennonite home church in Goshen.

The old “Robert Friedmann/Harold S. Bender/Delbert Plett” theory that Anabaptism is incompatible with Pietism, or that pietistic Revivalism has adulterated true Anabaptism is under review today. There is no doubt, that in Switzerland, in South Germany, Prussia, Russia, Alsace Lorraine, and elsewhere Mennonites have found that Anabaptism and the ideals of the pietistic renewal movement had much in common and assimilated strongly with each other. The birth of the mission movement in South Russia, as well as the renewal of the Mennonite Brethren Church 1860, the birth of the Neutäufer with Samuel Froehlich in Switzerland, even the Gemeededagbewegung in the Netherlands consider themselves as authentic Anabaptist renewal movements. Something similar happened in North America in the interaction of Old Mennonites and other Mennonite groups with the revival and later charismatic movement.

In the first 50 years of Mennonite World Conference such profoundly spiritual, theologically and historically well informed leaders like Jakob Kroeker (who provided the central theological orientation in the first three conferences), Christian Neff (who integrated the best of Revivalism and Rationalism), Harold S. Bender (the second real father of Mennonite World Conference after Neff and a profoundly spiritual leader, as his last sermon and prayer illustrated in Kitchener 1962), C.F. Klassen (“Gott kann”; who integrated simple spirituality with high level diplomacy) or Fritz Kuiper (who brought together Dutch Mennonite Rationalism with Karl Barth, Christian Socialism and Messianic Judaism), have all helped to bridge these two camps and these two perspectives on Christianity.

Today we need a new critical look at both traditions: liberal Rationalism and revival-charismatic Pietism. Apart from their great contribution to Mennonite history, church life and theology, they are quite similar in several dangerous aspects: they both tend to overemphasize the individual over against the communitarian Anabaptist approach. They both tend to be overly empirical over against a clear understanding of divine revelation (Offenbarungsglaube). They both are in danger of reducing the cause of Jesus to moralism. And they both tend to consider themselves a little more enlightened than the rest of the world; producing such unpleasant phenomenon we could call “new Anabaptist arrogance” or a “new Anabaptist sectarianism”.

In our postmodern context today, classic Liberalism and Rationalism have lost their persuasive power. And the classic revival music and pietistic “Busskampf”, as well as joyous “assurance of salvation”, are not very appealing anymore either. The tensions arise more strongly on styles of spirituality and liturgy, on more High Church sacramental perspectives versus more emotionally charismatic styles, and approaches to church life on topics of evangelism, missions, ecumenical dialogue, Neocalvinism, the religious right, and gender issues.

So the controversy is not passé. After the Winnipeg assembly in 1990 Brazilian MBs dropped out, because they considered Mennonite World Conference too liberal. Recently, for similar reasons,

the Sommerfeld Church in Canada, choose to drop out of MCC and to not join Mennonite World Conference. Not one of the very numerous church groups of Russian-born Low German Aussiedler, or immigrants, to Germany has yet found their way to MWC, partly for lack of good will on both sides, but partly also out of fear for “liberalism” and “ecumenism”. The same is true for the Amish, Hutterite and Old Colony communities, who also trace their origins back to Anabaptism.

On the other hand, while writing my commentary to the “Shared Convictions,” there were serious voices coming to me, preoccupied that it could end up being far too evangelical. The same happened recently with the questionnaire of the Global Anabaptist Profile Study, which was considered inapplicable by some member churches because of revival/conversion language that was allegedly too strong.

The rational/liberal as well as the revival/pietistic traditions are both under review in global Christianity as well as in the Mennonite family. Today, in a postmodern context, awareness has grown that the old theological Liberalism and its “historic-critical method,” with its Kant-Hegel-Troeltsch rationality, was actually quite ethnocentric and Eurocentric. And the emotional-judgmental-fear ridden language of old Revivalism has given room almost everywhere to a more joyful charismatic or meditative Iona-Taizee spirituality. Nevertheless, neither approach (the liberal and the pietistic) is very well equipped to deal with the new issues and challenges in the area of sexual ethics, religious terrorism or theology of leadership.

Conclusion

If I review all 90 years of Mennonite World Conference dealing with conflict, I am encouraged. None of the four topics we have addressed here are as hot and burning today as they were in certain moments of the past, except the growing global refugee issue. And the global family today is probably more united than ever before, even though the challenge to do this with 100 Mennonite cultures is far bigger than it was with a quite homogeneous group 90 years ago.

What is the secret? Definitely the grace of God, the lordship of Jesus, and the miraculous glue of the Holy Spirit, present in all of our churches. But then there might be at least three additional secrets:

1. All along the way, God gave us very integrating and gifted leaders from Christian Neff and Harold S. Bender to Larry Miller, Danisa Ndlovu, Janet Plenert, and César García.
2. Missions and the growth of the young South has been an incredible blessing. The old churches need the young ones even more than the young need the older ones.
3. Christ-centered fellowship has helped us to focus on common ground, to strengthen shared convictions and to be gracious and patient with each other.