

WHY I AM A MENNONITE

The title assigned for this essay begs to be followed by several important questions. Do I or did I have a choice in the matter? If the answer implies that Mennonitism is an option rather than historically defined, then there are a series of questions regarding the definition of being Mennonite.

Although the centuries of history are essential in understanding any definition of the term Mennonite, allow me to make my starting point clean;

You don't have to be a Mennonite to be Christian but you must be
Christian to be a Mennonite!

The original question can then be divided into two. One must first answer why one has become a Christian; then answer why one has chosen the Mennonite path within the larger community of faith.

I was raised in a Mennonite community, attended a Mennonite church and a Mennonite high school. I could have added a traditional Mennonite home but upon reflection it probably wasn't very traditional. My home was a traditional Christian home in that we were raised with the Book, were taught the traditional stories and Christian values. There was ample opportunity in family, church, camp, and other situations to make the faith of my parents my own. My decision to accept Christ was made at the age of 8 at Camp Arnes, a Christian summer camp operated by Christian businessmen, most of which were Mennonite. At the age of 12 I was baptized together with my friends into our local Mennonite Church. I became a Mennonite in the same sense that the children of a Catholic family become Catholic and those of Baptist parents are likely to become Baptist. I chose to become a Christian (although some social scientists may dispute that) but I probably didn't really choose to become Mennonite.

There is a very important sociological factor in the process of entering the Mennonite Church which creates the interminable debates regarding ethnicity versus faith. My recollections from childhood contain strong memories of being aware of my ethnicity, but that was only loosely attached to being Mennonite. German was the lingua franca in our home until I attended elementary school. Whereas the neighbours spoke low-German, only high German was permitted in our house. My parents were completely bilingual and my mother had three degrees from American universities. I was aware from an early age that German was promoted to give us the benefit of a second language rather than as an inability to integrate into the dominate culture. We had

borscht on Tuesdays, zwiebach on Saturdays, raised chickens, pickled cucumbers and eekra. Although our home resembled those of our neighbours, my mind never connected these practices with our church. It would be like defining someone who spoke German and ate sauerkraut as a Nazi.

I made an earlier reference that our home was not a traditional home. Upon reflection upon my home and parents I have come to realize that to a certain degree ethnicity was also chosen in our home. My mother had left home at the age of 18 spending time in Moscow, China and then a dozen years as student and professor in a variety of American colleges. These included Bethel College but also Moody and the University of Minnesota. During the thirties when many of her contemporaries were raising families on the farm or working as domestic help in the cities, she lived in an intellectual environment, attended non-Mennonite churches, or makeup, drove a car and attended movies. The decision to marry into a Mennonite family and move back into the Mennonite community was deliberate and not without pain. My parents spent the first two years in a community which did not have a Mennonite church to consciously establish their own independent lifestyle.

My home environment participated in many of the ethnic practices to blend into the neighbourhood. The preparation of food was a necessary evil so my mother took the path that was most convenient. The German language was also a part of the community, but low German was seen as a waste of time – so we were not permitted to use it. Our home was also always full of a variety of books- I can never remember when we did not receive the National Geographic. Travel was a priority in our family. The trips were always by automobile and the meandering through historical sites, museums and cultural attractions enroute were evidently more important than the destination. Our home and dinner table were often filled with interesting Mennonite and other visitors. My mother enjoyed the intellectual stimulation and it was her way of being aware and participating in the affairs of the church while retaining a reasonably quiet profile in public.

The ethnicity of our home reflected the traditions of my parents, but also reflected a conscious desire to be part of a community of faith with a minimum of friction. The visitors, books, travels as well as a flexible attitude toward traditions gave me a positive attitude toward my ethnic background. I never felt it as a trap or burden – it was simply my inheritance. Whereas, many of our friends resented their parents and traditions; I thank my parents for raising their children in a way which freed me from this resentment.

During my late teens I genuinely felt that I could choose to remain within the Mennonite church or choose a different Christian path. Although I probably did not choose to become a Mennonite, I definitely chose to remain one.

The decision to remain in the Mennonite church is a blend of sociological and religious factors. During my university years the ties to the Mennonites church and community became very tenuous, providing ample opportunity to consider alternatives. I became very involved with foreign students, spent a summer working and travelling in Europe, studied in Boston and essentially spent the bulk of my university years at a substantial distance from my background. It became evident that everybody else also had a heritage which was to varying degrees either a burden or an asset. It also became obvious that the only heritage I could ever have would be my own. My choice was to live without the benefit of my roots or to come to terms with them. The opportunity to enter the family business was also a factor since I recognized that it would make much more sense to live as a full member of the community than to be within it but to have rejected its most important element.

The decision to remain within the Mennonite Church was also very substantially the result of placing a value upon certain traditions and religious distinctions. I was never taught that to be Mennonite gave one an edge in the sight of God, and it was never part of my understanding of the faith. The understanding of what constituted the religious tenets of the Mennonite Church did not demise from the teaching in church or the Mennonite high school, since it always seemed that the present interpretation (and the interpreters) were narrower than the image that came through a reading of church history or a study of the gospels. My mother became very impatient with the church leaders who focused on theological issues which were not relevant to our daily life or took short-sighted positions on emerging social issues. At an early age I gained the impression that the message is greater than the messenger at hand. This raises the interesting question, and one which I continue to struggle with, whether the definition of being Mennonite is somehow an absolute or whether it is simply the sum total of current attitudes and values of those who consider themselves to be Mennonite. It is for this reason that the ethnic factor in defining Mennonite must be discounted. I was encouraged to remain in the Mennonite Church because I felt it represented values and theological distinctions which were worth preserving. If it should simply become a vessel for preserving a pseudo-German culture and some East-European recipes, it isn't worth the trouble. I am proud of my heritage – both ethnic and religious – but recognize that the linkage is simply personal, and has nothing to do with the religious values I consider important.

What are the religious distinctions which I consider to be Mennonite? As mentioned earlier these were derived more by example and observation than by teaching. One of the most important elements observable in my parents and many of our Mennonite neighbours was the complete integration of faith and in daily life. Integrity in business and social relationships, respect of the Sabbath, concern for neighbours were evident in every transaction. Although non-resistance was seldom taught as a theory, I was imbued at an early age with the sense that we were citizens of God's Kingdom rather than an earthly one. Government should be respected and obeyed but it should not claim our first loyalty. My parents were intimately involved with support of missions; our basement was the depot for gathering and packaging used clothing, and we often were involved with direct assistance to the needy in our neighbourhood. I was well into university before I realized that MCC and the Mission Board were two different organizations. In our home there had never been a distinction between the validity of the two programs. These were the values which I considered to be Mennonite since they were the values of my parents.

The university years provided opportunity to reassess my own values and to compare them to other value systems. My most critical years were spent at Goshen College and Harvard Business School. This was during the height of the civil rights movement, the start of the Vietnam War and a point in history where every value and tradition was challenged by my peers. I participated fully in the spirit of the times, marched with Martin Luther King, painted anti-Goldwater signs, and joined in anti-Vietnam marches. It was during this time that I recognized that the attitude toward prejudice, war, the disenfranchised that was inherent in my mother's example was refreshingly avant garde in the turmoil of my university environs. The position of the Mennonite Church on many of these issues was also more defensible and rational than the left/right or conservative/liberal rhetoric of the rabble rousers or the established church. The centuries of tradition in areas such as reaction to violence, the long experience of being a minority and in many cases recent refugees, the experience of being destitute gave the Mennonite Church a sensitivity and credibility in its response which was often lacking elsewhere. The religious and experiential tradition of the Mennonite Church came to be understood as a potentially valuable asset. I also recognized that to a large degree such a tradition is taught and therefore can be accepted by others but may not always be fully integrated. Although other traditions may also have great value, it seemed counterproductive to simply exchange one for another, and lose the deep roots of the tradition I owned in the process.

I chose to remain a Mennonite, but it has occurred to me that what I chose may only be my own definition of what a Mennonite is. Is Mennonite a historical absolute against which one tests present attitudes? Is it a living tradition which changes over time and is continually redefined? If the latter; are there any boundaries which distinguish the Mennonite faith from others? If the Mennonite faith is evolutionary in nature, who is or should be determining the new directions? Is this the role for one or more charismatic leaders, church professionals or a survey of the membership? Can Mennonite define a diverse set of ideas and people at the same time?

For me, the definition of what it is to be a Mennonite must be consistent with the historical origins of the movement. Although one can focus on the issues which were prominent in the sixteenth century, a more important and the distinguishing factor which made them a definable group is their approach to religious issues. In my view, the essence of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement was the rejection of the mainstream and the willingness to test the frontiers of Christianity. This resulted in new doctrines on baptism and war, a new emphasis on community and service, and a redefinition of the relationship between the believer and God. The priesthood of believers provides continual opportunity to redefine the position of the church in regard to changes in the political, social and technical spheres. Centralized authority will tend to reinforce and follow the mainstream. A decentralized Church will always test new frontiers. The Mennonite faith, in its ideal form, provides opportunities for a continuous and radical redefinition of the church, balanced by the anchors of history and tradition which prevent capricious changes of direction.

I have chosen to remain a Mennonite because it represents the best format to deal with the tension of being a citizen of the world and a citizen of God's Kingdom at the same time. To be a Christian is to live in tension with the world - and the essence of the Mennonite faith is to find the creative limits to that tension. Unfortunately, many of my fellow Mennonites may understand the nature of being Mennonite in a different way, with the result that the church does not meet the needs of either. Nevertheless, I believe that the creative tension and the ability to test frontiers is an essential element of the church and central to my continued association.

From my earliest days, I can recall always acting in a way which resisted the mainstream, but not cutting my ties completely. I joined the Mennonite Church and attended a Mennonite High School, but never attended church youth programs, rather crossing town to the programs of non-Mennonite churches. I spent more time at IVCF Camps than Mennonite camps. After high school, I sought intellectual stimulation at university rather than Bible School, but followed that with a year at Goshen College to balance the input. I married a lovely German-speaking Christian girl, but she was from

outside the Mennonite tradition. My daughters are being raised in the Mennonite Church, but have different racial origins than their parents. Whereas others have sought the simplest and least controversial path through life, I have always been drawn to the 'road less travelled'.

During my recent years I have become involved with the needs of the poor and homeless in various countries. This has included service with MCC, the National Association of Evangelicals, the Government of Canada and the United Nations. Additional involvement in Canada has included the resettlement of refugees and the founding of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. Many of these involvements have been both popular and controversial at the same time. In the same way that racial equality was the issue of the sixties; refugees and hunger have been critical issues of the last decade. I am pleased to be a part of a church which has produced so many individuals active in Christian missions and service and which are spawned MCC, the Foodgrains Bank and other refugee aid programs. These programs have been at the frontiers of the Christian church in our time and yet there are many untested frontiers. At the same time, there is as much tension within the church regarding many of these initiatives as between the church and society suggesting that the church is not of one mind.

The Mennonite Church seems to be torn in three conflicting directions at the same time. There is an element which is oriented to its traditions, ethnic as well as religious. Another segment discounts the value of tradition and desires to integrate spiritually as well as sociologically with the dominant culture. A third element seeks to keep alive the radical traditions of the church in the form of innovative social action.

I am a Mennonite because I believe that each of these three strands has some validity and that there is still room for a person of my convictions within the church and an opportunity to redefine the frontiers between the church and society. As Mennonites, we need to build on tradition but not worship it, integrate with society but reject its shallow spirituality and to radicalize and challenge social policy without forgetting the centrality of Christ.