

***The Mennonite Brethren Story:  
Exploring the Roots and Identity of  
a Missional Family of Christians***

Pastors Credentialing Orientation

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**Four Outcomes for the Day**

1. "MB history is an MB mystery" – introduce a global family (movement) of missional Christians called Mennonite Brethren
2. Name central features of Mennonite Brethren identity or "DNA"
3. Offer an outline, some resources, and a model for how you can tell the Mennonite Brethren story in your congregation or ministry setting
4. Identify and explore a variety of specific issues from the past that might have relevance for today

How does the Mennonite Brethren Conference understand its relationship with other Christians?

**We affirm that the Kingdom of God is the larger work of God of which the Mennonite Brethren story is but one part. The Kingdom of God is much larger than any one denominational story**

**How we tell the story**

- With respect and affirmation for other Christians
- Without exclusivity, triumphalism, and spiritual elitism
- With humility and honesty

### **Collaboration for common cause**

**When MBs are at their best, and true to their historic roots, they welcome collaboration with other denominations where the central concern is a common allegiance to Jesus Christ and the cause of God's Kingdom**

**Spirituality is always ground in embodied practice (Charles Taylor)**

**Recognize that faith is always embodied and expressed in particular cultural and denominational forms - everyone who flies the flag of Jesus is also flying a denominational flag**

### ***Denominations***

- a) have been used by Satan to divide Christians
- b) are essential for the expression of diversity among Christians
- c) are a distraction from the more important things God wants Christians to do
- d) may be acceptable to God, but only as a concession to human sinfulness
- e) are like, whatever...who cares? I just want to be a Christian

### **MB Relationships with Other Christians**

**1. Need to clarify the relationship between the MB Story and the larger work (kingdom) of God in the world**

(b) Avoiding extremes

i) Spiritual elitism and triumphalistic exclusivity  
- Essential qualities: humility and honesty

ii) Appealing to "generic" Christianity as the basis for identity and unity among Christians  
- Every Christian is connected to a ***particular*** tradition within the larger story of Christianity

## Healthy Denominationalism

Differences among Christians are inevitable. The differences among Christians are best contained within denominations, and that cooperation among denominations is an essential way to demonstrate unity

A healthy understanding (theology) of denominationalism sees denominations as a way for differences among Christians to be expressed in constructive ways, and sees different theological emphases as gifts to the entire body of Christ

Jeremiah Burroughs, *Irencium: Healing the Divisions Among God's People* (1646)

Flag Metaphor	What it Means	What to Avoid
<b>Flying the Flag of Jesus</b>	<p>Insuring that the central concern in relating to other Christians is a common allegiance to Jesus Christ and the cause of God's Kingdom</p> <p>A commitment to collaborative ecumenism</p>	<p>Ignoring or diminishing the reality of particular denominational expressions</p> <p>Conveying the perception that "My way of seeing/understanding Jesus is the only way of seeing/understanding Jesus"</p>
<b>Flying the MB Flag</b>	<p>Recognizing the cultural &amp; theological particularities that shape how we hear, understand and embody the good news of the Kingdom</p> <p>Knowing what MB identity and theological convictions contribute to the larger body of Christ</p>	<p>Rejecting exclusive, dogmatic, divisive, elitist approaches to denominational identity that inhibit collaboration and public witness</p>

## The Legacy of the Sixteenth-Century Radical Reformation

Suffering for the Faith

## A Contextual Introduction to the Reformation: A Convergence of Factors

**ECONOMIC:** From medieval feudalism (exchange of services) to entrepreneurial cash-based economies

**POLITICAL:** Rise of nation states & fragmentation of Holy Roman empire

**RELIGIOUS:** Roman Catholic Church is the official, state-supported religion, but credibility and power is being challenged

**MILITARY:** Internal and external military threats occupied military forces – fear of Turkish Muslims

**TECHNOLOGY:** cross-ocean navigation and a reading public

**PHILOSOPHY:** From medieval scholasticism to Christian humanism (*ad fontes*)

## General Characteristics of the Anabaptist Movement

1. Naming – “Re-baptizers” - considered a seditious and dangerous movement whose ideas would result in the destruction of Europe’s religious and social institutions
2. Diverse and controversial – seen as “terrorists”
3. Size – relatively small
4. Leadership - comprised of pastors and preachers not academic theologians
5. Independent - no centralized ecclesiastical authority

## 6. A Persecuted and Suffering Church

Making sense of suffering

Facilitating a diaspora

Political impact of persecuting a peaceful people

Shaping of identity & the telling of stories (*The Martyrs Mirror*)



## Radical Reformation Exemplars

### 1. Switzerland

\* Conrad Grebel (c 1498-1526) and Felix Manz (c. 1498-1527)

\* Michael Sattler (c. 1495-1527)



## Radical Reformation Exemplars

### 2. Southern Germany and Austria

- \* Balthasar Hubmaier (c. 1480-1528)
- \* Hans Denck (c. 1495-1527) and the Martyrs Synod (1527)
- \* Pilgram Marpeck (? – 1556)



## Radical Reformation Exemplars

### 3. Moravia

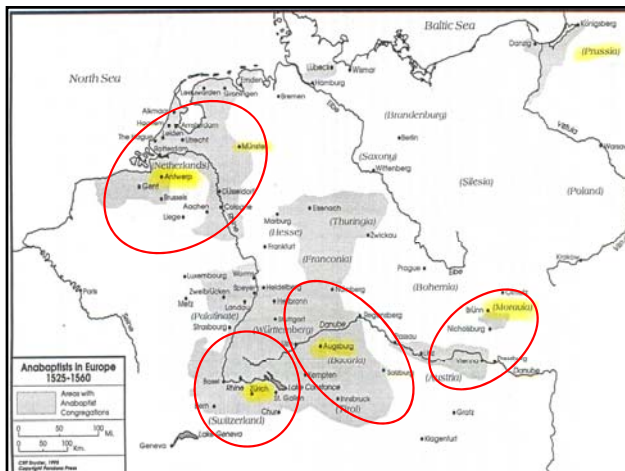
- \* Jakob Hutter (? – 1536)
- \* Peter Riedemann



## Radical Reformation Exemplars

### 4. Northern Germany and the Netherlands

- \* Menno Simons (1496-1561)
- \* Dirk Philips (1504-1568) and Leenaert Bouwens



## Overview of Anabaptist Theology

### 1. Scripture

- New Testament takes precedence over the Old Testament – Christocentric reading
- Authoritative yes, but whose interpretation?
- The congregation as a hermeneutical community

### 2. Christology

- used the Apostles Creed; and affirmed the Nicean and Chalcedonian Creeds
- More emphasis on following Jesus' example than trying to explain his death on the cross

### 3. Pneumatology (Holy Spirit)

- talked more about Holy Spirit than other reformers
- illuminator of Scripture, comforter in sorrow, transformer of sinners

## Overview of Anabaptist Theology

### 4. Work of God in Humanity

- affirmed that salvation comes through God's grace
- emphasize choice and cooperating with God
- true faith will produce good works

### 5. Ecclesiology (Church) – “without spot or wrinkle”

- restoring not merely reforming
- true church is a voluntary community of baptized adults
- located authority within the community of believers
- leadership and exemplary living
- keeping the church “pure”: using the ban

### 6. Discipleship (*nachfolge Christi*)

- discipleship as a “lived communal reality”
- sincerity and salvation is tested/confirmed by behaviour
- vulnerability towards legalism

## Overview of Anabaptist Theology

### 7. The relationship of church to government

- necessary because of sin in order to keep order
- variation among Anabaptists regarding the participation of Christians

### 8. Non-resistance (rejection of the sword)

- not synonymous with pacifism
- initially a response to coercive actions on the part of state churches against those with whom they disagreed
- variety of views among Anabaptists regarding the use of force on the part of governments
  - complete refusal
  - interim non-resistance
  - possibility of use in a “defensive war”

## Overview of Anabaptist Theology

### 9. Ordinances (not sacraments)

- Baptism and Communion: symbols of an inner spiritual reality
- Not a mark of citizenship, but indicator of voluntary membership in a fellowship of believers

### 10. Eschatology (Last Things)

- No consensus, but the majority are amillennialists

### 11. Missionary Activity

- Linked Christian witness to discipleship
- Used a variety of means for Christian witness

## Mennonite Brethren Origins, Identity and Early Challenges

From Origins to Global Diaspora

## Mennonites in Russia

Mennonite Settlement in the Ukraine



## Mennonite Life in Russia

1. Invitation in 1789 by Catherine the Great along with a formal *Privilegium*
2. Mennonite Settlement in the Ukraine  
- agrarian villages in isolated colonies
3. Church / village government partnership
4. The pastoral (and theological) challenge of nominalism ("cradle Mennonites")

## Mennonite Brethren Origins

1. Dissatisfaction and the desire for spiritual vitality
2. Home Bible Studies and Local Revivals
3. Conflict with Mennonite authorities
4. Wuest, Gnadenfeld and the influence of German Pietism  
- study of the Bible, personal conversion, right living  
- innovators in missiology and collaboration

## Early Challenges

1. Dealing with Excesses
  - the "Exuberance Movement"
2. Getting Organized: A Little Help from Baptist friends
  - Baptism by immersion
  - Organizational practices and structures
3. Russian Government Investigations
  - the work of Alexander Brune
4. Identity Issues: Baptists? Or Mennonites

## A New Way of Doing Mennonite: Early MB Emphases and Priorities

1. Centrality of personal conversion experience
  - experiential piety and assurance of salvation
  - represents a turn towards a more Protestant view of soteriology
2. Consistent Holy Christian Living
3. House Church Movement
  - makes the movement more intimate and portable
  - noteworthy is the role of women
4. An Eclectic Borrowing of Practices and Emphases
  - Baptism by immersion, Confession of Faith, hymnody
5. Evangelistic and Mission-minded
  - participated in missionary ventures with Baptist societies before organizing their own

## The Russian Mennonite "Golden Age"

1. Expansion of Mennonite colonies
2. New Business and Educational Opportunities
3. Mennonite Institutions
4. New Internal Divisions (rich/poor, rural/urban)
5. Revolution (1917): the beginning of the end of Mennonite life in Russia
  - the Mennonite *Selbstschutz*

## A Mennonite Diaspora

1. To go, or stay? That is the question
  - migrations to Canada, Europe and South America
2. Help from Mennonites in North America: the formation of MCC
3. The systematic banishment of men
4. The decimation of churches
5. How does faith survive in such times of severe hostility and persecution?



## The Mennonite Brethren in North America

Freedom, Growth, Prosperity,  
Acculturation and a Renewed  
Sense of Mission

## Mennonite Brethren in Canada

1. The “Kanadier” immigrant wave to North America during the 1870s
2. MB Origins in Manitoba (1880s)
3. Relocation of Mennonite immigrants in the USA to Saskatchewan during the early 1900s
3. The “Russlaender” immigrant wave (1920s-1940s)
  - major impact on congregational and conference life in Canada

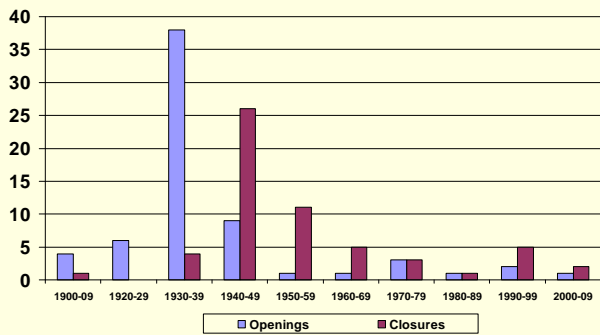
## Mennonite Brethren Membership in Canada

	BC	AB	SK	MB	ON	PQ	MT	Total
1920			1425	365				1790
1930	206	221	2166	1483				4076
1940	1131	873	2800	2268	805			7877
1950	3343	1048	2130	2664	1525			10710
1960	4453	1199	2276	3853	2171			13952
1970	5660	1456	2495	4445	2778	46		16880
1980	7861	1974	3034	5240	3457	326	45	21892
1990	11320	2294	3240	5866	3825	691	64	27236
2000	17700	2500	3300	6100	4600	500	127	34000
2010	19545	2625	3217	6321	4595	575	235	37113

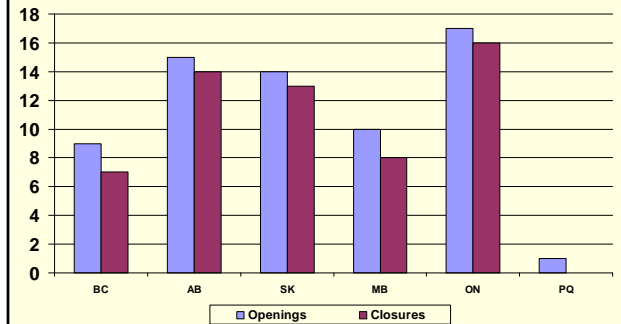
## Challenges and Issues

1. Adjusting as immigrants
  - Getting established
  - Cultural differences with other Mennonites
  - Revival of old tensions with other Mennonites
2. Concern for the faith formation of young people
  - Longstanding interest in higher education
  - Bible schools for spiritual formation
  - Bible schools as crucibles for cultural change
  - the location for first English-language outreach ministries – the seeds for home mission

### Mennonite Bible Schools & Colleges in Canada (1907-2006)



### Mennonite Bible Schools & Colleges in Canada (1907-2006)



### Challenges and Issues

3. Defining (and redefining) the relationship between faith and culture
  - e.g., beards, life insurance, hair, weddings, television, involvement in politics, etc.
4. Language Transition
  - *Muttersprache* (mother tongue) or apostasy?: "Those who give up the German language are traitors to their home, church and their precious German Bibles" (B.B. Jantz)
5. From Farm to City
  - MBs were the most rapidly urbanized Mennonite denomination in Canada

### Challenges and Issues

6. From Poverty to Affluence
  - New economic opportunities
7. War, Peace and the State
  - Alternative service vs. military service



## Challenges and Issues

8. The professionalization of church ministry
9. Impact of evangelical Protestantism: shaping a dual theological identity
  - natural compatibility, but how to preserve MB convictions?
10. Managing theological differences
  - Confessions of Faith (1902, 1975, 1999)
  - Board of Faith & Life, Study Conference, Credentialing
11. Confronting ethnocentrism: Is "Mennonite" a religious or ethnic term?
  - need for consistency between our theological affirmation that we are all equal before God, and the words we use
  - all Mennonite Brethren are ethnic Mennonites

## Challenges and Issues

12. Incorporation of new immigrant and ethnic groups
13. Organizing new outreach ministries in an increasingly pluralistic, multi-cultural, secular nation
  - Church-growth movement influences
  - Key Cities Initiative
  - C2C - Nationalized strategy and structure

## Extending the Mennonite Brethren Community

A Global Multi-cultural Community of Faith

## An International Community

1. The legacy of long-term missionary activity
2. The role of MB Mission

Country	Membership
India (960 cong)	203,000
Congo (670 cong)	102,000
KHMU (Thailand)	40,000
Brazil (70 cong)	6,500
Germany (50 cong)	8,800
Angola (80 cong)	7,000
Paraguay (95 cong)	6,600

## A Global Multi-Cultural Community of Faith

1. [International Community of Mennonite Brethren \(ICOMB\)](#) – intro from Exec Director David Wiebe
2. Cultural Diversification in North America
3. The Challenges of Diversity
  - theological unity
  - acculturation of immigrant congregations
4. What does it mean to be multi-cultural?
  - opportunity to enhance public witness

## The Future of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches

TBA

What will the next generation say about us and our contribution?

## Selected Web-based Resources

[Canadian MB Conference Office \(Winnipeg\)](#)

[Mennonite Brethren Herald](#)

[Direction Journal](#)

[Basic Mennonite Library](#)

[GAMEO](#)

[Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith](#)

[Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith \(Commentary and Pastoral Application\)](#)

[Pamphlet Series](#)

[Pastoral Care Booklet Series](#)

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