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

Pastors Credentialing Orientation

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Lower Mainland, BC

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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 grounded 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 a 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, *Irenicum: Healing the Divisions Among God's People* (1646)

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

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

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”

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

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

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**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

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**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

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**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, Acculuturation and a Renewed Sense of Mission

Mennonite Brethren Membership in Canada

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>BC</th>
<th>AB</th>
<th>SK</th>
<th>MB</th>
<th>ON</th>
<th>PQ</th>
<th>MT</th>
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<td>1425</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>1790</td>
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<td>221</td>
<td>2166</td>
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<td>46</td>
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<td>45</td>
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<td>2625</td>
<td>3217</td>
<td>6321</td>
<td>4595</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>235</td>
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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 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
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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Membership</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India (960 cong)</td>
<td>203,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congo (670 cong)</td>
<td>102,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KHMU (Thailand)</td>
<td>40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil (70 cong)</td>
<td>6,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany (50 cong)</td>
<td>8,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angola (80 cong)</td>
<td>7,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraguay (95 cong)</td>
<td>6,600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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

Anabaptism: Selected Bibliography
MB Studies: Selected Bibliography


