

# The Mennonite Quarterly Review

## **Mennonite World Conference 1925-2000: From Euro-American Conference to Worldwide Communion**

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*Abstract:* In 1925 Mennonites in Europe began a series of meetings they called Mennonite World Conference (MWC). They intended these occasional meetings to deepen fraternal ties, commemorate shared histories and strengthen common spiritual interests. After World War II, with conspicuous North American involvement these meetings were regularized and became large convocations. As in many church traditions, Mennonites and Brethren in Christ have become global bodies. Mennonite World Conference has become the focal point where nearly all Mennonite groups from six continents meet. The majority of members now live in the global South. Responding to this new situation, MWC has become more than an occasional conference. This article summarizes the history of how MWC is becoming a worldwide communion and a "space" for theological conversation, mutual admonition, the exchange of gifts and the expression of common witness.

Most chroniclers of the twentieth century say little if anything about its religious significance. But in the long view of history, perhaps the most remarkable theme of this century will be seen in the globalizing of the Christian movement.<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century

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Christianity was overwhelmingly a Euro-American phenomenon. By the end of the century Christianity had become deeply rooted in all continents. Statistics illustrate this enormous transition. According to the missiologist David Barrett, in 1900 there were fewer than 600 million Christians out of a world population of 1.6 billion. Eighty percent of all Christians lived in Europe and North America. Barrett reports that in the year 2000 there were 2 billion Christians out of a world population of 6 billion.<sup>2</sup> While the percentage of the population who call themselves Christian has not changed, the location is now remarkably different. Now 60% live in the "South," meaning Africa, Asia, Latin America and Australia.

For Mennonites these changes are even more striking. In 1900 the best estimates suggest that there were fewer than 250,000 Mennonites in the world, 98% living in Europe and North America. By the year 2000 Mennonite numbers had reached 1.2 million, 60% of whom live in the global South.<sup>3</sup>

The Mennonite and Brethren in Christ organization that most reflects these significant twentieth-century transitions is the Mennonite World Conference (MWC). Formed in 1925 by European Mennonites for periodic meetings, MWC became a permanent structure in the 1950s. Some of this story has been told before.<sup>4</sup> In this article we trace the seventy-five years of the conference organization in light of the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ becoming a global family of churches. The dream of founder Christian Neff, a German Mennonite pastor and historian, is doubtless as relevant in this new century and new situation

Leidschendam, The Netherlands, was a teacher at the Mennonite Theological Seminary in Pati, Indonesia and former Executive Secretary of the Algemene Doopsgezinde Societeit (ADS) and has volunteered for MWC in various capacities.

1. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 2002) is the most current work highlighting the historical significance of this process, which is impacting nearly every Christian group.

2. The data is from David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, "Annual Statistical Data on Global Mission: 2002," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (Jan. 2002), 23. For greater detail see Barrett, et al., *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (2001).

3. Mennonite data comes from the *Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Directory 2000* and Wilbert Shenk, *By Faith They Went Out* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2000), 94.

4. See especially articles by Harold S. Bender in *ME* 3:640-42 and by Paul N. Kraybill, *ME* 5:574-75; C. J. Dyck, "The Mennonite World Conference," *MQR* 41 (June 1967), 277-87 is an important overview, that was revised and extended for the *Mennonite World Handbook* (1978). *Mennonite Life* had notable strong coverage of MWC and its assemblies from 1948 to 1997. See especially C. J. Dyck and Robert S. Kreider, "Mennonite World Conference in Review: A Photographic Essay," *Mennonite Life* (June 1978), 4-22.

as when he first articulated it ninety years ago: "Our strength is great if we stand united in one faith and remain loyal to the brotherhood."<sup>5</sup>

### BEGINNINGS

At every point in its seventy-five years, MWC was part of the larger fabric of history. Modern technology, transportation and communication have become essential for international relationships. The church has adopted new styles of organization in business and public life, particularly in North America. Mennonites have frequently been participants in, victims of, and sometimes simply observers of the twentieth-century's terrible wars, authoritarian governments, mass suffering and death. And concern for the human situation has helped to stimulate a search for sharing a common witness of Christ.

These historical developments in the twentieth century encouraged other Christian traditions to find one another at the same time that Mennonites were beginning to do so. Already in the late nineteenth century, for example, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Anglican Church, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Methodists had world meetings. The Baptist World Alliance first convened in 1905.<sup>6</sup> And in 1920 the Society of Friends World Conference met for the first time. The Lutheran World Convention (later Lutheran World Federation) convened first in 1923.

Alongside these confessional bodies were inter-church meetings in Europe and North America, which emerged out of the highly visible world-mission movement and culminated in the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910.<sup>7</sup> In 1925, the same year of the first MWC, the "Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work" convened in Stockholm.

Missions were also a point of international contact for Mennonites. Dutch Mennonites started their mission society in 1848, initiating an overseas program in the Netherlands East Indies in 1851. Already in 1853

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5. From an address at the All-Mennonite Convention in Berne, Indiana, 1913. *Mennonite Life* (July 1948) printed this quotation on its back cover.

6. *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 156. Also see Harold E. Fey, "Confessional Families and the Ecumenical Movement" in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1968*, ed. Harold E. Fey, 4th ed. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993), 177 ff.

7. Two of the three Mennonite participants at Edinburgh tell their story in J. S. Hartzler and J. S. Shoemaker, *Among Missions in the Orient and Observations by the Way* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1912). Chapter 2 is an interesting commentary on this significant event.

German Mennonites had joined the Dutch effort, and shortly thereafter the Russian Mennonites joined in this cooperative effort.<sup>8</sup> By the turn of the century North American Mennonite missionaries from the major mission boards were discovering the satisfactions of cooperative ministries in India, South America and Central Africa, which contributed to the development of a set of common concerns. The German publication *Mennonitische Blätter*, read in Russia and North America, provided another link between Mennonites. In addition, family ties united Mennonites across national boundaries as well as the ocean, and people traveled and wrote letters.

In one such letter, written on February 17, 1913, mission promoter and pastor P. H. Richert of Goessel, Kansas invited German Mennonite leader and historian Christian Neff of Weierhof, Germany to participate in what was later called an All-Mennonite Convention.<sup>9</sup> Neff attended the Berne, Indiana "All Mennonite Convention" in the summer of 1913, where he preached the opening sermon. This convention, initiated by progressive voices in the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church and several regional bodies, was the first of a series of nine such meetings, the last held in 1936 at Topeka, Indiana. Although the conventions highlighted the common interests of several Mennonite groups, "no constitution was adopted and no permanent organization formed, but at the close of each meeting officers and program committee were elected to plan for and conduct the next meeting."<sup>10</sup> During its first three decades, the MWC adopted a very similar approach.

Already in July 1912 the *Mennonitische Blätter* published two letters from pastor Heinrich Pauls from Lemberg (then Austria, now L'viv in Ukraine), in which he called for an International Mennonite Conference to be held in Lemberg in the week before Pentecost 1913. Pauls was inspired by a visit of a Brother Regier from Mountain Lake, Minnesota, as he noted in a letter, "to the brothers Hege-Stuttgart, Cramer-Amsterdam, Epp-Jekaterinoslaw, G. van der Smissen and Sprunger-Berne, Wiens-Scottdale (Pa.), Shellenberg-Hillsboro (Kans)."<sup>11</sup> Although

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8. American Mennonites were aware of this development but only began working with Dutch missionaries after World War II.

9. "Dear Brother in Christ: It may be known to you, that here in America we are making an attempt to bring together all shades of our community in a General Convention this coming August, as it seems now in Berne, Indiana. Through Br. H. P. Krehbiel, Newton, Kas., I learned that you may be in America by then. . . . If so, we'd like to ask you to speak to the theme: 'Unity in Prayer.' After Matt. 18, 19 and Acts 1:14."—Christian Neff papers, Archives Mennonitische Geschichtsverein Weierhof (hereafter AMG).

10. N. E. Byler, "The All-Mennonite Convention," *Mennonite Life* (July 1948), 7-9.

11. "Eine Mennonitische Weltkonferenz," *Mennonitische Blätter* (July 1912), 50-51.

nothing came of Pauls' effort, his initiative suggests that the idea of a Mennonite World Conference was afloat.<sup>12</sup>

Parallel to these developments, Mennonites in various European countries were responding to the trauma of war and revolution. As the enormous suffering of Mennonites in the newly formed Soviet Union became known, fellow believers in Germany, Holland, Canada and the United States began to work together in channeling assistance, which led to the founding of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in North America in 1920. In the summer of 1924 Christian Neff, as chair of the South German Mennonite Conference, initiated the call for a "Mennonite World Conference" to commemorate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Mennonites in 1925. In his letter of June 24, 1924 sent to all the Mennonite Churches "throughout the world"—which then meant Europe and North America—Neff suggested three forms of celebration. First, he urged each congregation to celebrate the event on Sunday, January 25, 1925, the date of the first re-baptisms four centuries earlier, in a forerunner of what we today call World Fellowship Sunday. Second, he called for a world conference: "If ever, now the occasion offers itself for all Mennonites throughout the world to come together through a meeting of representatives."<sup>13</sup> Third, Neff proposed to publish a commemorative book.

### *Basel*

On June 13, 1925 the first Mennonite World Conference convened with about one hundred people in attendance. Although the fifteen delegates—representing Switzerland (2), Germany (7), France (1), Holland (4) and one from America—could hardly be viewed as a representative body, the gathering in Basel included several motifs that continued in subsequent meetings. There was much singing and a designated conference sermon—based on Psalm 85 and preached by Russia-born German theologian Jacob Kroeker. There were greetings from neighboring churches and letters from those unable to be present. Johann Klassen, a missionary from Java in the East Indies, spoke, thereby beginning the sustained connection of MWC with newer Mennonite churches. A strong commemorative element included speeches on

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12. Also reported by Dutch pastor J. M. Leendertz: "When I visited the American Congregations in 1921, while nobody yet talked about a commemorative celebration, many people there talked to me about the possibility of a World Conference, which had their sympathy."—*Gemeentedag Brieven* 8:9 (1925). Translated by Ed van Straten.

13. "Liebe Bruder." The letter of invitation by Christian Neff, dated June 24, 1924.—Neff papers, AMG.

Mennonite history and a pilgrimage to Zurich, where the university recognized Christian Neff for his contribution to Mennonite history with an honorary degree.

In his sermon Kroeker called this "a momentous occasion, an important hour. . . . The whole world which has lost the way of righteousness and peace is looking to us to see whether they can possibly find in a little Christ-centered denomination the solution for the great problems now confronting them and the way back to the light. What shall our answer be?"<sup>14</sup> Remembering the past as a basis for contemporary mission would become a theme for most of the later assemblies.

Swiss authorities did not allow the Russian representatives to enter the country, so a delegation from the conference went to the border, within walking distance, to meet with delegates Jacob Rempel and Benjamin Unruh. On June 15, 1925 Rempel and Unruh wrote a letter to the conference and presented a statement prepared by the *Allgemeine Mennonitische Bundeskonferenz* (All Russian Conference of Mennonites) in Moscow, on January 17, 1925, which Neff read to the meeting.<sup>15</sup> The vision articulated in the letter and statement is significant. Unruh and Rempel referred gratefully to the assistance Russian Mennonites had received following the difficult war years. How to do something in return? The Russian congregations "do not have silver or gold," Unruh wrote. "Once they used to have both. Now they are poor. And yet the Russian congregations have something to give. They can testify that the Christian faith is no delusion." The statement issued by the conference in Moscow also gave thanks for the aid from Mennonites elsewhere in the world, which tightened the bonds between Mennonites. "We welcome the idea of establishing a Mennonite World Union, whose unanimous expression should be a meeting of representatives of all Mennonites in the world. This Mennonite World Conference shall meet where the cradle stood of our congregations, now spread out across the earth."<sup>16</sup> Russian Mennonites then went on to develop the most comprehensive vision for a unifying world body.

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14. Quoted by H. J. Krehbiel, *A Trip Through Europe* (Newton, KS: Herald Pub. Co., 1926), 104.

15. *Bericht über die 400-jährige Jubiläumsfeier der Mennoniten oder Taufgesinnten June 13-15, 1925* (Karlsruhe: Verlag Bibelheim Thomashof, n.d.), 152-60. The letter and statement were translated by Elizabeth Bender and Mary Bender, "Russians Hoped to Repay Aid: Early MWC Ideas," *Courier* 1:2 (1986), 11.

16. *Ibid.*

The purpose of such an organization, noted in an accompanying letter by Peter Braun, would be the "coming together of all Mennonites and care for Mennonites now in the whole world with the preservation of diversity and the complete independence of all tendencies and nuances within the Mennonite world." In order to reach this goal, there should be established a "central office, a central treasury, literature and periodic meetings of general delegates."<sup>17</sup> Such an organization would make possible:

1. External and internal building up of the church, especially of the scattered smaller groups;
2. Founding and maintaining of schools, both of ecclesiastical and secular nature;
3. Mission activity;
4. Support of the needy and suffering, especially of students;
5. Immigration and emigration;
6. An address book (directory).<sup>18</sup>

The Russian brothers were well aware of the price tag. "Right now," they said, "Russian Mennonites are completely impoverished and still need help. But it will not always be so." Both those who had already emigrated and those remaining in Russia would be willing to pay back the support they received, in part or totally. Rather than try to repay the American Mennonites who "would protest" such, why not put the repayment in "the central treasury of the World Mennonite organization to be established. . . . The central treasury would not lack funds in the future."<sup>19</sup>

Willem Koekebakker, Dutch pastor of the Dortrecht-Breda congregation, suggested names for a World Committee and warmly applauded the Russian proposal. Not all the Dutch, however, wanted another Mennonite institution. Other voices spoke against a Mennonite World Union. Neff was asked to propose next steps and to call a second conference, if possible in two or three years. As happened at subsequent meetings, some who attended wanted fewer long sermons and addresses and more discussion. The Dutch group was split: representatives of the official conference (ADS) were more liberal, whereas the people representing the *Gemeentedagbeweging* belonged to the more conservative wing.<sup>20</sup> Conflicts over faith issues between Dutch and Swiss

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. J. M. Leendertzs complaint.—*Gemeentedagbrief* 9 (1925), 19. See also *Zondagsbode* 48

representatives were resolved in a friendly manner. The Basel delegates were not prepared to create a permanent body as the Russians proposed. Neff also knew that not all North American Mennonites supported a world conference. In a handwritten letter of December 14, 1924 Harold S. Bender wrote to Neff: "It seems that our community will not officially take part in the collective celebration and festival in Zurich or Basel. They especially take exception to the idea of a Mennonite World Union in which believing and unbelieving Mennonites would be united."<sup>21</sup> It was clear that by "our community" Bender was referring to the Old Mennonites.

### *Danzig*

Neff was not able to call a second conference in the suggested three years. However, it did finally take place in Danzig, Germany on August 31-September 3, 1930. What we now call the Second World Conference was at that time called the Mennonite World Aid Conference because the conveners did not intend to continue meeting as an official body. The focal point of the gathering was to assist the Russian sisters and brothers, some 20,000 of whom had congregated in Moscow waiting for permission to emigrate. The growing plight of Germans in the USSR had become a major public issue in Germany in the late 1920s, leading to considerable correspondence and a number of meetings among Mennonites to organize aid for the German-speaking sisters and brothers in Russia. Among western European Mennonites Benjamin Unruh, a Russian Mennonite then living in Germany, wrote frequently to Neff highlighting this concern. Hence this theme became the driving force at Danzig. Unruh and others tried to convince the Swiss and (German-speaking) Alsatian Mennonites to overcome their fears concerning the

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(Sept. 27, 1925), 573. "[Mission, assistance to Mennonite emigrants, *Mennonitisches Lexicon*, support for historical research] have been mentioned, but not put in the center of attention, let alone discussed. Such discussion would have heightened the practical effect of the congress and strengthened mutual cooperation. . . . The peculiar thing was that the receiving Swiss congregations, who put their stamp on all of the Basel Congress did not care very much for those practical goals of the world congress, for international cooperation. Rather they wanted to make this memorial celebration a big evangelical meeting, for which, moreover, they had invited half of Basel." Translated by Ed van Straten.

21. "Es scheint dass unsere Gemeinschaft nicht an der gemeinsamen Feier und Fest in Zurich oder Basel offiziell teilnehmen will. Es wird Anstoss genommen besonders an dem Gedanken einer Mennonitischen Weltbundes wo gläubige und ungläubige Mennoniten vereingt werden." This letter, of which the last part is missing, is in the Christian Neff files at AMG. Bender also gives another reason, in his eyes not valid: "Many of our preachers are on principle against any festival and celebration."

orthodoxy of the Russian sisters and brothers and to take part in the conference. "We do not think it is our task here to discuss differences in the faith between individual congregations and groups of congregations," Unruh wrote to Samuel Nussbaumer, elder in Basel. "How the Russian Christians believe in Christ you may have seen at the Lord's Supper in which you participated in Molin [Basel]."<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, the Swiss Mennonites decided not to come to Danzig. Christian Schnebele from the Thomashof in Germany represented the Alsatian Mennonites. Schnebele had written to other Alsatian leaders and urged them to attend: "Questions of faith will not be talked about at this conference or the difference between congregations nor the matter of pastors or non-pastors."<sup>23</sup> Then he offered to represent the Alsatian Mennonites if they would not represent themselves. The French-speaking Mennonites from France did send representatives. One of their leaders, Pierre Sommer, in an address to the conference noted his hesitation about coming: "Would it not have been better to give the money now spent on traveling to the aid fund?" He also warned that it is "important to know which Christ we have."<sup>24</sup> The conference, however, was not about faith issues, as in Basel, but the practical issues of mutual aid.

Erich Goettner, the host pastor in Danzig, preached the conference sermon based on Psalm 50:15. Professor Wilhelm Kuhler of Amsterdam followed with a major historical address about the history of Dutch Mennonite foreign aid, beginning in 1672 when the Dutch brethren, although divided over faith issues, forgot these differences as they organized assistance for oppressed Swiss Mennonites. Already Mennonites were discovering that Christian love unites what intolerance divides.<sup>25</sup> Harold Bender, living at that time in Germany, noted in his greeting that he was not representing any church, but an organization representing all the Mennonite conferences of the U.S., the Mennonite

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22. Translated from one of the letters in the Neff files, AMG.

23. Christian Schnebele, Aug. 18, 1930. Trans. from copy to Christian Neff.—Neff files, AMG.

24. "Aber is ist wichtig zu wissen, welchen Christus wir haben," from Christian Neff, ed., *Bericht über die Mennonitische Welt-Hilf-Konferenz, Aug.31-Sept. 3.1930* (Karlsruhe: Verlag Heinrich Schneider, n.d.), 29. French Mennonites did join the effort to make assistance available. "For the first time in their history, the French Mennonites gave help beyond the borders. Doing this brought them into contact with their German, Dutch, Canadian, American, and Russian fellow believers."—Jean Seguy, *Les Assemblées Anabaptiste-Mennonites De France* (1977), 595. The papers of the Danzig Conference were translated and edited by Paul Schmidt and Delbert Gratz at MCC, Akron, Pennsylvania and made available in 1946.

25. *Ibid.*, 39.

Central Committee.<sup>26</sup> Other speakers included David Toews (Rosthern, Canada), Benjamin Unruh (Karlsruhe, Germany), C. F. Klassen (Winnipeg, Canada) and S. H. N. Gorter (Rotterdam, Holland), who presented statements on the situation in Russia, on Russian immigrants in Canada, on the situation in Paraguay and on what national committees were doing. Discussions centered on what could be done for Mennonites who had fled from Russia to Canada, China, Brazil and Paraguay; and for those in refugee camps in Germany as well as those remaining in Russia itself. In the end the group decided to sponsor special church collections in all the Mennonite congregations throughout the world on the same Sunday in order to help those who had fled to Canada. David Toews agreed to write an article for publication in Mennonite newspapers. The Conference adopted a motion proposed by pastor Fritz Kuiper, Krommenie, Holland: "The World-Aid-Conference wishes the representatives of the different aid-organizations to work out a plan as soon as possible for further opportunities for economic and charitable aid to brethren in need through mutual cooperation."<sup>27</sup> Chairman Neff was again asked to organize the next world conference.

Immediately after the Danzig meeting B. H. Unruh worked with the German government to develop a plan for moving refugees from Russia to Brazil. In offerings held in November 1930 churches raised over \$18,000 in Holland, nearly \$8,000 in North America and almost \$7,000 in Germany, France and Poland.<sup>28</sup>

### *Amsterdam/Elspeet*

The third Mennonite World Conference met in Holland on June 29-July 3, 1936. The Dutch organizers, fearing the creation of a new institution, announced this conference as a "General Congress of Mennonites," but this rubric did not survive the meeting.<sup>29</sup> When Christian Neff went to Holland to plan this meeting on May 8, 1935, he invited Harold S. Bender, then completing his doctorate at Heidelberg University, to accompany him. Bender, who had been present at Danzig and knew about Neff's call for the first conference, would later become the main organizer of MWC assemblies, a task that ended only with his

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26. *Ibid.*, 25.

27. *Ibid.*, 155.

28. Christian Neff, ed., *Der Allegemeine Kongress Der Mennoniten June 29-July 31, 1936* (Karlsruhe: Verlag Heinrich Schneider, n.d.), 152.

29. Orie O. Miller and Harold S. Bender, "An Account of the Third Mennonite World Conference," *MQR* 11 (Jan. 1937), 3.

death in 1962. The gathering convened first in Amsterdam and later at the retreat center in Elspeet, with an excursion to Witmarsum on the four-hundredth anniversary of Menno Simons' conversion.

Between the Danzig gathering in 1930 and the Dutch event in 1936 the European situation changed strikingly. Hitler had come to power in 1933 and Nazism was exerting a strong appeal for Germans, including many Mennonites. In letters to Christian Neff, "Heil Hitler" appeared more frequently.<sup>30</sup> Harold Bender, who drove Neff to Amsterdam for the preparatory meetings, discovered that what seemed to Americans to be clear distinctions between believers and nonbelievers was complex. In his biography of Bender, historian Albert N. Keim notes, "He [Bender] was especially aware that precisely when German Mennonites were being drawn into the Nazi orbit and forsaking nonresistance, the Dutch were moving into the other direction. For him, it was an instructive lesson, if difficult to accept."<sup>31</sup> During the first days presenters from different countries addressed the main theme of the Conference, "Mennonites in the past and present." When the Congress moved to the Elspeet retreat center "Broederschapshuis Elspeet," topics shifted to "Mennonites and Youth" and "Mennonites and Culture."<sup>32</sup> This last topic especially caused controversy, with clear differences between the Germans on one side and the Americans and Dutch on the other.<sup>33</sup> One of the leading newspapers in Holland, *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, noted: "The Americans apparently felt the need in militaristic Europe to again and again confess their absolute rejection of this [militarism]. To reject military service is a matter of course to them, which simply cannot be separated from their religious convictions."<sup>34</sup> There was bound to be a reaction from the German side. Oral tradition refers to considerable uneasiness and even anger at the occasion.<sup>35</sup> Yet in spite of sharply

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30. Neff himself was not a Nazi. In the newsletter of Weierhof Mennonite Church he published his 1940 Christmas sermon, including a strong rejection of the war. The newsletter was henceforth forbidden.—Gary J. Waltner, ed., *300 Jahre Mennonite Gemeinde Weierhof* (Weierhof: AMG, 1982), 51.

31. Albert N. Keim, *Harold S. Bender* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 251.

32. See the program in the 1936 proceedings.

33. Walter Fellman wrote later: "It should have been possible to clarify from the Gospel the differences of opinion between the American-Dutch peace friends and the German confirmation of the need for military defense."—Cited in *Brieven Uitgegeven Door De Vereeniging Voor Gemeentedagen Van Doopgezinden*, XIX, 9.

34. Translated from the *Zondagsbode* 39 (July 1936). Not only were newspapers interested in this congress, but Dutch radio broadcasted the closing worship from the Witmarsum church nationwide. Another "first" at this conference was the daily conference newspaper, issued in the official conference languages of Dutch and German.

35. Hans Jakob Galle, Weierhof, Germany volunteered this information to Ed van

worded disagreements, the general spirit of this meeting could tolerate even such arguments. The group again turned to the issue of aid to the Russian Mennonites—both those still inside the Soviet Union and those who had emigrated to Canada and South America.

Overall, the spirit of unity at Amsterdam and Elspeet promised a future for a world conference.<sup>36</sup> Orië O. Miller and Harold Bender reported in North America that while the conference did not make plans for another future meeting, “the steering committee indicated the hope that another similar meeting might be held in connection with some suitable occasion in five or six years, and expressed the desire that it might be held in America.”<sup>37</sup>

Immediately following the conference, representatives of European and North American Mennonite Peace Committees met in Fredeshiem, another Dutch Mennonite retreat center, to discuss what they could do together on the peace issue. They released an appeal and decided to organize a second initiative along with their cooperation on the issue of aid to Russian Mennonites—the creation of an International Mennonite Peace Committee to channel support to Mennonites who suffered for refusing to do military service.<sup>38</sup>

By the conclusion of the 1936 meeting, the delegates had established the value of a Mennonite gathering across national and linguistic boundaries. The violence and hatreds of World War II would not erase the desire of Mennonites from across political borders for fellowship and for strengthening a common spiritual devotion. It was clear, however, that those identified with this growing movement continued to be relatively few in number—dozens rather than hundreds. There was deep disagreement over how large and how continuous an organization would be necessary to nurture an international fellowship.

#### THE ASSEMBLY PATTERN

In 1939, before a fourth world conference could be scheduled, World War II broke out. The war destroyed once vigorous Mennonite communities in West Prussia, Poland and Ukraine. Tens of thousands of Mennonites were exiled to Siberia or became refugees in Western Europe. Mennonites in western Germany, France and the Netherlands

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Straten in October 1999.

36. H. C. Leignes Bakhoven in *Doopsgezind Jaarboekje 1937*, 58-65.

37. Miller and Bender, “An Account of the Third Mennonite World Conference,” 5, 6.

38. *Ibid.*, 10, 11.

suffered considerable loss of life and property, and wartime hostilities and hatreds threatened to permanently alienate Mennonites from one another. Already in 1940 MCC had begun relief work in Poland, Germany, France and England. And as soon as hostilities ceased, additional workers from Canada and the U.S. moved into Holland and occupied Germany. The presence of these youthful peace workers did more than provide emergency food and rehabilitation. They became the sinews for reconnecting churches that had been in opposing countries during the war. Through these workers the slow rebuilding of trust and mutual regard so necessary for the re-establishment of MWC took place.

In the fall of 1946 the Western District (Kansas and Oklahoma) of the General Conference Mennonite Church urged General Conference leaders to invite the World Conference to convene in North Newton, Kansas. At the 1947 tri-annual meeting of the General Conference Mennonite Church in Berne, Indiana the delegates went on record, asking MCC to sponsor the next MWC Assembly in North America. MCC leadership—consisting of P. C. Hiebert (Mennonite Brethren Chair), H. A. Fast (General Conference Vice Chair), Harold S. Bender (Mennonite Church Assistant Secretary of MCC), and Orie O. Miller (Executive Secretary of MCC)—was quite amenable to the idea. Three of these had attended previous MWC meetings. But they also were aware of opposition to MWC in North America. So this initiative became an occasion to test support for inter-conference connections, particularly within the (old) Mennonite Church. Since the 1920s this largest of North American Mennonite bodies was quite suspicious of “modernizing” conversations across conference lines. On the occasion of the 1936 meetings the weekly church paper the *Gospel Herald* published a report of the meetings in Holland by Orie O. Miller and Harold S. Bender, who noted that “the conference was entirely unofficial in character,” taking action only on general resolutions. But they rather enthusiastically noted: “What a marvelous and blessed thing it would be to have a united World Mennonitism united in faith and practice and work. Such a unity would without doubt strengthen the Mennonite Church everywhere.”<sup>39</sup>

However, in the same issue of the *Gospel Herald* editor Daniel Kauffman cautioned that differences between Mennonite groups “makes it idle to dream of a federation and later amalgamation.”<sup>40</sup> This caution

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39. Orie O. Miller and H. S. Bender, “An Account of the Third Mennonite World Conference Held at Amsterdam, Elspeet and Witmarsum, Holland, June 29-July 3, 1936,” *Gospel Herald*, Sept. 24, 1936, 557. Much of this article reappeared in the January 1937 issue of *MQR*.

40. Editorial, *Gospel Herald*, Sept. 24, 1936, 1.

was a signal for one of the more rigid Mennonite Church voices, John H. Mosemann, a bishop from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to express his strong opposition to "the proposed 4<sup>th</sup> MWC." He recited perceived differences among Mennonite groups on such theological themes as the uniqueness of the Christian faith, plenary inspiration of the scriptures, the trinity and "creation as a direct and personal act of God." "Would not," he asked, "a world conference of Mennonites be sorely displeasing to the Lord in the light of the fact that some of them [sic] are practically unbelievers?"<sup>41</sup>

With these kinds of sentiments continuing to be widespread, the Mennonite Church General Conference, led by moderator John L. Stauffer, who personally opposed inter-Mennonite cooperation, decided in 1946 against "any organized participation in the world conference movement."<sup>42</sup>

It would have been difficult to hold a world conference in the United States, especially for MCC to serve as sponsor, if the largest Mennonite body refused to participate in such a meeting. Orie O. Miller, ever the creative administrator, proposed to Harold Bender, then on a sabbatical year in Europe, that "since you and I are on the Executive Committee of MCC, we'll represent the MC Mennonites."<sup>43</sup>

Prior to the above letter, Orie Miller sent a communication to a group called the Committee on Guidance and Counsel, authorizing them to plan the proposed 1948 assembly and to ignore the executive committee action of the Mennonite Church General Conference. P. C. Hiebert and Henry A. Fast, the chair and vice-chair of MCC respectively, were to lead the committee, which included J. J. Thiessen from the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, P. G. Lehman from the Mennonite Brethren in Christ, J. L. Stauffer, moderator of the Mennonite Church General Conference, J. N. Smucker, editor of *The Mennonite*, and Elmer Swartzendruber, representing the Conservative Amish (later Mennonite) Conference.<sup>44</sup>

Hiebert traveled to Iowa, Indiana, Eastern Pennsylvania and Virginia to consult with those who were hesitant about being "unequally yoked" with other Mennonite groups who were presumed to be "liberal in their

41. John H. Mosemann, "The Proposed Fourth Mennonite World Conference," *Gospel Herald*, Sept. 24, 1936, 637.

42. Keim, *Harold S. Bender*, 398.

43. *Ibid.* From a letter dated Nov. 15, 1947.

44. Orie O. Miller to the Committee, Nov. 10, 1947, Committee of Guidance and Counsel, MWC, Box 9-4-2.—Archives of the Mennonite Church (hereafter AMC), Goshen, Indiana.

thinking.” He was able to fashion a consensus for a program that would avoid controversial issues and would assign topics to “safe speakers.”<sup>45</sup> Between Bender in Europe and Hiebert, this committee was successful in developing an acceptable program.

### *Goshen/North Newton*

The fourth assembly convened in Goshen, Indiana, August 3-5, 1948 and at North Newton, Kansas, August 7-10. Having the meeting in both places made the conference easier for hesitant (Old) Mennonites to accept. Over 2000 people attended the Goshen and North Newton public sessions, including thirty-seven overseas guests. This was the first conference at which Americans were in a clear majority. Speakers represented all the nationalities present and more than twenty North American groups. The presence of delegates from Brazil, China, India and Paraguay—including several who were students in American Mennonite colleges—created an assembly significant for recognizing Mennonite churches beyond Europe and North America. All ages and both sexes participated in discussions that ranged widely on practical, historical and theological topics. The chair P. C. Hiebert gave the opening addresses at both Goshen and North Newton.

Any tension between American Mennonite groups could hardly compare to the tensions felt among representatives from the war-torn countries of Europe. Oral tradition suggests that Dutch and German delegates found relationships difficult already on the Atlantic voyage. In his response to the conference sermon, Emil Händiges, a Prussian refugee now living in West Germany, the only person present at all previous conferences, referred to the hard blow of the war. Then he added: “Woe unto us, that we have sinned. . . . It is also our transgressions that have caused this judgment upon our homeland.”<sup>46</sup>

Dirk Cattepoel, pastor of the Krefeld, Germany congregation, began his report on “Mennonites in Germany, 1936-1948, and the Present Outlook” by noting that every German Christian has to answer “one question before all others: what is your attitude toward all that happened in your country and to other nations through Nazism?” He particularly appealed to “my Dutch and French brothers and sisters” for

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45. P. C. Hiebert, “World Conference Negotiations,” Mss. In Box 91, file 1, Hiebert papers at Mennonite Historical Library and Archives (hereafter MHLA), Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas.

46. Response to Conference Sermon.—*Proceedings of the Fourth Mennonite World Conference August 3-10, 1948* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 1950), 12. These proceedings, published by MCC, were the first MWC proceedings to appear in English.

whom "forgiveness seems impossible. And yet, for Christ's sake, I ask you: Forgive us! And grant us—in the name of Christ—a new beginning of Christian brotherliness!"<sup>47</sup>

Henry A. Fast in his eloquent "Closing Conference Message" appealed to the conference to not allow the German guests to "go back without reassuring them that we have heard and that whatever there is to be forgiven is forgiven. We are as anxious as they that the old relationships of Christian brotherliness be re-established. . . . It would probably have been good if all of us would have come here with a spirit of penitence and confession, because neither are our hands clean, nor our hearts pure, nor our service perfect."<sup>48</sup>

The 1948 meetings were deeply satisfying to many. One of the Dutch delegates S. F. Golterman, however, chided the Americans for their internal disunity and separatism from North American society and suggested that the style of the meeting was really "an American conference not a world conference."<sup>49</sup> Several other Europeans complained of inadequate time for discussion and debate.

On the other hand, J. Winfield Fretz, a rising General Conference leader, called the conference "a significant adventure in world fellowship . . . tremendously valuable and enlarging especially for American Mennonites."<sup>50</sup> In sharp contrast to the reaction to the 1936 conference, the *Gospel Herald* editorial of April 24, 1948 called the fourth assembly "an event of outstanding interest and importance."<sup>51</sup> Editor Paul Erb, who had grown up in Kansas, was keenly aware of the rich possibilities of inter-Mennonite relationships.

The delegate session set up a continuation committee to plan a fifth world conference in the summer of 1952 or 1953 in "the area of the Swiss and French Mennonite Congregations." The delegate session observed that, although no such committee had previously existed, "the time has come to plan for the next World Conference" in a more regular fashion. This "Preparatory Commission" was to have representatives from the European conferences, one each from Brazil and Paraguay and "representatives from North America to be chosen by the MCC."<sup>52</sup> P. C.

47. *Ibid.*, 14-15.

48. *Ibid.*, 320.

49. S. F. Golterman, "Mennonite World Conference Impressions: A Dutch View," *Mennonite Life* (April 1949), 29.

50. J. Winfield Fretz, "Mennonite World Conference Impressions: An American View," *Ibid.*, 30.

51. "Editorial," *Gospel Herald*, Aug. 24, 1948, 779.

52. "Minutes of the Delegate Session," *Proceedings 1948*, 313-16.

Hiebert chaired the delegate session and Harold S. Bender served as recording secretary. The delegate session at North Newton adopted a Memorial Resolution honoring Christian Neff, "initiator . . . spiritual father and leader, chairman of the first conference . . . honorary chairman of the second and third conferences who died on December 31, 1946 at age 83."<sup>53</sup>

### *St. Chrischona*

The fifth world conference took place at St. Chrischona near Basel, Switzerland on August 10-15, 1952 with the theme "The Church of Christ and her Commission."<sup>54</sup> Like the first conference in 1925, events included a pilgrimage to Zurich, the location of the beginning of the Anabaptist movement. Some 218 official delegates attended—111 from North America, 104 from Europe, 2 from Indonesia and 1 from Paraguay. Daily attendance numbered about 600 with nearly 2000 attending the Sunday program. While German was the official language, electronic equipment enabled simultaneous translation in the two other conference languages of English and French. Other special features included discussion groups, a special meeting for women (but led by a man: Samuel Gerber from Les Reussilles, Switzerland) and a session for Mennonite scholars. This fifth MWC was the first to release a formal Conference Message to the member churches.<sup>55</sup> Bender stated that an important goal of the conference would be "a contribution to the quickening of our congregations throughout the world."<sup>56</sup> Another goal was to strengthen the connections between the different parts of the worldwide fellowship.<sup>57</sup> Some of the topics addressed included mission, refugees, the church world, ecumenical relations, congregations and youth. The pilgrimage to Zurich on the last day of the conference commemorated the martyrdom of Felix Manz and the leadership of Conrad Grebel.

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53. *Ibid.*, 315.

54. On August 9, the official delegates met, electing the preparatory committee members as the conference presidium.—*Die Gemeinde Christi und ihr Auftrag* (Karlsruhe: Buchdruckerei Heinrich Schneider, 1953), 387.

55. "Here at last, probably for the first time, our worldwide brotherhood has found a voice, a common voice of faith (*gemeinsame Glaubensstimme*)"—Harold S. Bender, *ibid.*, II.

56. *Ibid.*, VI.

57. *Ibid.*, VII.

*Karlsruhe*

The sixth Mennonite World Conference, meeting in Karlsruhe, Germany on August 10-15, 1957, was by far the largest MWC gathering up to this point as organizers found lodging for some 1300 people. As in 1952 there was simultaneous translating in the three conference languages (German, English, French). And for the first time women had their own meetings, led by women.

The most significant action of the Karlsruhe gathering put into place a constitution and the structure of a more formal organization. Delegates noted that they were not prepared for a "super church" but saw the need for a stronger continuing structure.<sup>58</sup> The working organization would be a "general council," sometimes called a presidium, made up of one representative from all member conferences. Conferences with more than 20,000 members were eligible for an additional member. This became the action body commissioned to meet one time between assemblies and to elect an executive committee of five led by the president. The delegate body, which met at the time of assemblies, served as a "counseling body" to give consideration to "matters submitted by the general council." The constitution was to have provisional validity for "one year following" the sixth MWC and "final validity" one year after the conference, "provided no objection is reported" by any constituent conference.<sup>59</sup>

Another special feature of the Karlsruhe gathering was a letter, handed out to all participants, with the request to give one's opinion about this sixth world conference and to enter proposals for the next. Twenty-two respondents gave widely differing proposals.<sup>60</sup> This concern for evaluation no doubt reflects the growing recognition that the Assemblies are peoples' conferences as well as delegates' meetings. The preparatory committee (now called Presidium) proposed Canada as the host country for the seventh world conference and, in a conference message, called on the group to address the threatening arms race. Although the conference message did not specifically mention nuclear armaments, the Dutch Algemeene Doopsgezinde Societat (A.D.S.) and the International Mennonite Peace Committee named nuclear weapons

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58. *Proceedings 1958*, 345-46.

59. The Constitution is included in Cornelius J. Dyck, ed., *The Lordship of Christ: Proceedings of the Seventh MWC, August 1-7, 1962* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1963), 698-700.

60. Sixth World Conference files, AMG.

as a major threat, and the Women's Meeting also urged the conference to address this issue.<sup>61</sup>

While the reforms implemented at Karlsruhe were not radical, they did redefine the purpose of the conferences as "regularly recurring meetings of brotherly fellowship" in order to strengthen "awareness of the world-wide brotherhood" and "to deepen faith and hope and aid the church in its ministry to the world."<sup>62</sup> The earlier emphasis on renewing appreciation for the historic heritage of faith is not so stated.

### *Kitchener*

The seventh Mennonite World Conference took place in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada on August 1-7, 1962. Harold S. Bender, the president, now very ill, was unable to be present at the opening session. When he later appeared, people were shocked to see the effects of his illness.<sup>63</sup> His opening address was read by vice-president and soon to be president Erland Waltner. At the end of the conference Bender's last public words expressed the hope that the Mennonite World Conference would be a continuing expression of church and unity:

We seek to feel what the brotherhood wants. Yes, dear friends, though at times we may seem to be somewhat ahead of the feeling of some, yet we should respond to the brotherhood. . . . I'm especially happy to see this growth of mutual understanding and desire to understand among us. . . . What of the future? I see all of these purposes still working, increasing in scope. . . . I do not see that we have to look forward toward a great world organization, which will do more than a conference of this sort, to be the channel of God's voice to speak to us. I see the stimulation, the strengthening, the challenge continuing, and I wonder sometimes whether we do not need more of this than we have.<sup>64</sup>

For Bender the world conference was a continuing process, not only as an instrument to keep the worldwide brotherhood together but as a place where this increasingly worldwide family would become more aware of its spiritual situation. He saw a leadership role for the world conference in the spiritual growth of the church family, yet he stopped short of envisioning the world conference developing into a world

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61. *Das Evangelium von Jesus Christ in der Welt, Proceedings of the Sixth MWC* (Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schneider, 1958), 187.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Unpublished travel diary of Dutch pastor Leo Laurensse, U. of Amsterdam Library.

64. *Proceedings*, 1962, 6.

organization. As reported in the *Dutch Mennonite Weekly* by one of those present: "To this Professor Bender gave witness, at a very moving moment on the Sunday evening, who, still a very weak man after his surgery, pronounced what he expected for the future of the international assemblies of the Mennonites. Not organizational unity, but a brotherhood-in-the-spirit."<sup>65</sup> The same anonymous journalist, impressed by the lectures, addresses, section meetings and discussion groups in which important issues were talked about, concluded that the real emphasis falls on meeting with one another. Nearly a year later on June 25, 1963 William Keeney, speaking to the representatives of the Dutch Mennonite congregations, reminded his hearers of the Kitchener theme, "The Lordship of Christ," which points to the unity of the Mennonites as members of the Congregation of Christ. Though differences persisted—for example, over several theological matters and the appropriate relationship with the World Council of Churches—participants had become ever more aware of their unity.<sup>66</sup> Growing into unity may have been the motive of the moderator at the Kitchener conference, who, after an evening session, urged the more than 1000 young people after the evening devotions to get up and dance a polonaise together throughout the building.<sup>67</sup> Part of the impact of the MWC was the large number of participants in Kitchener—12,207 registered.<sup>68</sup> This assembly was, in a way, a crowning work of Harold S. Bender, who died six weeks later on September 21.

Prior to the Kitchener gathering, C. J. Dyck, church historian and former MCC worker in Europe and Paraguay, had begun to assist Bender in planning the Kitchener program. In further defining the administration of MWC, the council named Dyck executive secretary and Erland Waltner, president. Dyck and Waltner, who also served as President of Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, became the new team that directed the organization for the next decade.

### *Amsterdam*

The eighth Mennonite World Conference took place in Amsterdam on July 23-30, 1967 with some 6000 people in attendance. The conference followed a familiar pattern of public addresses, sectional meetings and group discussions under the theme "The Witness of the Holy Spirit." As

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65. *Algemeen Doopsgezind Weekblad*, Aug. 18, 1962, 3.

66. Minutes Bestuurdersvergadering, ADS, June 24, 25, 1963, 35.

67. *Algemeen Doopsgezind Weekblad*, Aug. 25, 1962, no. 34, p. 3.

68. *Proceedings* 1962, 8.

always, meeting one another was one of the most important features of the conference, even if sometimes the contrasts between participants were great—as so well expressed by the widely reprinted photograph in *Mennonite Life* of an older American Mennonite woman in plain dress and prayer cap seated on a small bench together with a modern, short-skirted young European woman smoking a cigarette.<sup>69</sup> The closing worship service, with a sermon by Hendrik Bremer and a response by Vincent Harding, was broadcast over TV in Holland, through Eurovision, and also by Dutch worldwide radio.<sup>70</sup> Cornelius Krahn wrote: “Many participants stated that the worship service on the last day of the Conference was a climax of prophetic preaching and inspiration.”<sup>71</sup> The sermon and the response dealt with beggars rising up and walking, both in Acts 3 and in the world today.<sup>72</sup> After the conference a special chartered train, called “Menno Express,” carried 800 pilgrims to Witmarsum.<sup>73</sup>

At Amsterdam, delegates recognized that the Mennonite world was beginning to expand strikingly in the global South. Historian Cornelius Krahn observed that “for the first time a strong awareness of the fact that not all Mennonites have a white skin was created.”<sup>74</sup> Paul N. Kraybill, an Amsterdam participant and later executive secretary of the MWC, observed that “this eighth Conference came at an historic moment when the impact of the changing character of the Mennonite world community became more dramatically visible.”<sup>75</sup> An effort by young people at Amsterdam to nurture global fellowship with the “World Mennonite Youth Contact”<sup>76</sup> did not succeed.

For most Mennonites and Brethren in Christ, MWC means large periodic assemblies emphasizing fellowship, worship, inspiring

69. C. J. Dyck and Robert S. Kreider, “Mennonite World Conferences in Review: A Photographic Essay,” *Mennonite Life* (June 1978), 19.

70. Ed van Straten remembers listening to this service in Pati, Indonesia, 12,000 km. from Amsterdam.

71. *Mennonite Life* (Oct. 1967), 157.

72. C. J. Dyck, ed., *The Witness of the Holy Spirit: Proceedings of the Eighth Mennonite World Conference, July 23-30, 1967* (Elkhart, IN: MWC, 1967) 125-29.

73. Alle Hoekema, then one of the conductors on that train, estimates that some 800 passengers were on board. The destination boards on the train did indeed say this was the “Menno Express.”

74. *Mennonite Life* (Oct. 1967), 157.

75. Paul N. Kraybill, “Anabaptists, Mennonites and the Mennonite World Conference: A Profile,” an address to the meeting of the Secretaries of Christian World Communities, Jerusalem, Oct. 18-20, 1988, 25. Unpublished manuscript.

76. *Algemeen Doopsgezind Weekblad*, Aug. 5, 1967, p. 5.

addresses and smaller group discussions, and featuring printed programs, published proceedings and specially created hymnbooks.<sup>77</sup> Over time large numbers of Europeans and North Americans also began to use these meetings as occasions for international travel. Smaller groups, first delegates and later the general council, did the business of the conference.

By 1967, however, rumblings of concern arose among MWC leaders that the focus on the assembly event reduced the energy needed to cultivate other kinds of inter-church relationships. Assemblies were costly and required much time of the host community. The growing numbers of representatives from non-western societies raised further questions about the transportability of such conferences to Mennonite locations throughout the world. Thus, beginning in the 1970s other agenda emerged alongside the assembly gathering that gave even greater significance to the now established organization.

#### TRANSITION

From its inception in 1925 Mennonite World Conference steadily shifted from its Euro-American orientation to becoming worldwide in character. Like most profound changes, this took place over an extended period of time, with the years 1966 to 1975 being a kind of pivot. Before 1966 the Euro-American conference motif prevailed. After 1975 MWC was on the way toward being a global communion.

In his report to the ninth MWC held at Curitiba, Brazil on July 18-23, 1972, executive secretary C. J. Dyck reflected on the future of the conference. Dyck asked whether the term "fellowship" was strong enough to overcome what he perceived as deep-seated congregational and conference autonomy. Given these tendencies, "What kind of unity is possible, and desirable in a world brotherhood in which every congregation is ultimately responsible only to itself?"<sup>78</sup>

Dyck also wondered whether MWC had possibly served its purpose. Perhaps continental conferences should be the new model rather than big worldwide conclaves. Perhaps a series of fraternal visitors could serve the purpose of maintaining inter-church international connections. He observed that other church unity movements "seem almost to have

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77. Since World War II only the fifth assembly in 1952 had fewer than 1000 in attendance.

78. Cornelium J. Dyck, ed., *Jesus Christ Reconciles: Proceedings of the Ninth Mennonite World Conference, July 18-23, 1972* (Elkhart, IN: MWC, 1972), xxi.

run their course.”<sup>79</sup> 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 this 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.<sup>80</sup>

Changes in organizational representation would have to be made to achieve these new goals. He 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.<sup>81</sup>

Dyck was obviously reflecting questions being raised by others as well. Representatives of the worldwide church (the General Council) had already met for the first time outside Europe and North America in Asuncion, Paraguay. In 1969, for example, the executive committee met in Kinshasa, then capital of Zaire (now Congo), and in October 1971 it traveled to Dhamtari in Central India to join in the formation of the Asia Mennonite Conference. At these meetings the dynamic of the worldwide church was increasingly evident. The purposes and structures of MWC needed to be updated.

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79. *Ibid.*, xxii.

80. *Ibid.*, xxii and xxiii.

81. *Ibid.*, xxiii.

Looking back, the larger context of this shifting focus becomes clearer. Between 1945 and 1969 Mennonite and Brethren in Christ started 63 new missions. The resulting churches, added to the 25 begun before 1945, created a network in more than 50 countries. These churches were growing much more rapidly than churches in the North. Already in 1970 there were nearly twice as many members in the global South as in Europe, and by the 1990s Mennonites in the southern hemisphere had surpassed the number of those in the North.<sup>82</sup>

### *Curitiba*

Discussions over the future of MWC became even more acute as controversy erupted over the decision to hold the 1972 meeting in Curitiba, Brazil. Under military rule at the time, Brazil vigorously repressed dissenting voices. At the 1967 gathering Vincent Harding had said, "This much we know, the revolutionary beggars will wait no longer. Christ has promised to be with all beggars and His promises are sure. . . . March out, saints, and be counted."<sup>83</sup> Now some Mennonites, in particular the Dutch, took Harding's message to heart and asked whether the Assembly should be held in a repressive society where freedom of expression would be limited. In June 1970 Algemeene Doopsgezinde Societet (ADS), the Dutch Mennonite Conference, decided they could not in good conscience be represented at a conference in a police state where freedom of discussion would be limited.<sup>84</sup> Executive Secretary C. J. Dyck struggled throughout much of 1970 and 1971 to determine whether or not the MWC should convene in Brazil.

Dyck traveled to Amsterdam, Karlsruhe and Winnipeg searching for a means of compromise. In January 1971 a representative group including the Dutch vice president of MWC, theologian J. A. Oosterbaan, traveled to Brazil to examine the situation. Meanwhile, the Brazilian Mennonites were upset that their invitation was not wholeheartedly received. Oosterbaan told his Brazilian friends that neither the Dutch nor MWC had any interest in jeopardizing their "life and work through protest actions unacceptable to political authorities there." However, after

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82. Shenk, *By Faith They Went Out*, 95.

83. *Proceedings* 1967, 129.

84. C. J. Dyck reported the action by the Dutch ADS June 9, 1970 in a letter to the presidium dated Sept. 1, 1970.—X-9-9 MWC Box 13, Presidium file AMC. The action stated that "the convening of the MWC in Brazil is undesirable under the circumstances and that no delegates will be sent from the Netherlands in the event of its meeting there being scheduled." The Lutheran World Federation had also decided to move its scheduled meeting out of Brazil as a protest to these conditions.

learning that there would be police observers at the meetings, he stated, "This reminds us too much of the German occupation time. It may be better to go where we are free to say what we wish."<sup>85</sup>

After extended discussion and days of prayer, Dyck, Oosterbaan and the other visitors, along with the Brazilian church leadership, decided that, while Curitiba had its limitations, the church throughout history has flourished in a variety of political settings. The very act of meeting would make a statement. They agreed to limit public political discussion and strongly urged the Dutch ADS to reconsider their decision. The ADS did not rescind its action but decided that a small delegation should go to Brazil to demonstrate their solidarity with the worldwide community of faith.

Those who attended the Curitiba Assembly discovered that not all Latin American Mennonites were prepared to curb their political discussion. Handouts entitled "What Does the Latin American Reality Say to Our Consciences?" and printed in several languages were distributed to those arriving on the grounds. The statement identified fifteen oppressions of poor, landless and especially indigenous people. They appealed for a "new infusion of the Holy Spirit that will show us that to keep silent before these injustices means to accept them" and called for the recovery of "the Anabaptist conscience of the people of God as a redemptive community."<sup>86</sup>

The conference theme at Curitiba, "Jesus Christ Reconciles," provided rich biblical and practical applications for the church living in a deeply divided world amidst oppressive political, economic, cultural and religious systems. Assembly President Erland Waltner, after an exposition based on Ephesians 2:11-16, said that in spite of the new "spiritual and moral interdependence" of the global Mennonite reality, "none of us has reached such ethical attitudes that we have no need for repentance."<sup>87</sup>

In spite of the tensions generated over meeting in Brazil, the ninth MWC was highly successful. Representatives from more than twenty nations were in attendance, and among the 1800 registrants were representatives from thirty-three countries. Local Mennonites were affirmed in their witness. Few of the visitors remembered that the

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85. Record of the ad hoc meeting re Ninth MWC Issues MB Bible Institute, Curitiba, Brazil, Jan. 18-19, 1971, p. 4. Attached to a Jan. 27, 1971 letter report from C. J. Dyck to Erland Waltner, Pres. MWC.—John A. Lapp personal files.

86. Copy in Lapp "Curitiba" file, 1972.

87. *Proceedings*, 1972, 7, 8.

Mennonite emigrants to Brazil had received substantial encouragement at the 1930 MWC meeting in Danzig, including financial support from the Dutch Committee for Meeting Foreign Needs. Visitors also discovered substantial local and economic difference in Latin America between Portuguese and Spanish immigrants and indigenous tribal people as well as with prospering German Mennonites.

At the conference itself, numerous section groups discussed C. J. Dyck's report urging a re-examination of the MWC purpose and future. Uniformly they affirmed its continuation, including new structures. The minutes of the presidium noted "firm sentiment in favor of continuing MWC though the forms might vary." Frank H. Epp, a Canadian delegate, drafted a summary resolution that reaffirmed the conference "as a channel of fellowship and witness," urged a strengthening of the secretariat, greater equalization of international representation and further joint work on publication, peace and youth activities.<sup>88</sup>

#### *Permanent Secretariat*

This transition from "Euro-American Conference to Worldwide Communion" only accelerated after Curitiba. At the 1973 meeting of the presidium in Basel, President Erland Waltner and Executive Secretary C. J. Dyck announced that they were not available for continued service. Milion Belete, an educator and church administrator from Ethiopia, was named the new president, the first African and non Euro-American in this post. Paul N. Kraybill, former overseas secretary for Eastern Mennonite Missions, at that time general secretary of the Mennonite Church in North America, was named the new executive secretary of MWC. With his understanding of the worldwide Mennonite churches, Kraybill brought considerable insight and energy to this task.

Delegates at Curitiba had called for a more permanent staff for MWC, but this issue was still debated. Jan Matthijssen expressed long and widely held Dutch opinion that paid staff was not necessary. Suhadiweko Djojodihardjo, leader of the Javanese Mennonite Conference (GITJ), argued that MWC must be more than a meeting. It should study issues and serve as "a channel for getting counsel from Mennonite bodies in international settings."<sup>89</sup> Pak Djojo's point of view carried the

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88. Minutes of the presidium meetings. Ninth MWC, Curitiba, Brazil. X-9-9 Box 14 MWC.—AMC.

89. Tenth MWC official minutes. Presidium # 1, Liestal, Switzerland, July 18, 1972, p. 5, X-9-10 MWC Box 4 (19).—AMC.

day. For the first time the executive secretary received a salary for one-fourth of his time.

A major task since then has been to build a stronger financial base for MWC and to develop a model for a more equitable international representation. Paul Kraybill, executive secretary from 1973 to 1990, deserves much credit for deliberately and systematically working to globalize MWC structures. During the 1970s he drafted a revised constitution, which was adopted 1976. This constitution provided for annual meetings of an executive committee (presidium terminology was dropped), with the more representative general council meeting one time between assemblies. The assembly was now to be held every six years. Each member body had at least one member on the general council; and larger bodies had proportionately more. The revised constitution highlighted three major purposes of the MWC: fellowship, communication and facilitation. These functions would provide "mutual encouragement on a world-wide basis," serve as channels for "discussion and mutual burden bearing so that the needs and problems of each member group may become the concern of the entire world-wide Mennonite community" and "promote vision and mutuality" through "joint efforts and common programs."<sup>90</sup>

Kraybill's strong convictions impacted not only MWC itself but also relationships with other church agencies. Whereas MCC had tended to represent North American interaction with churches in the former Soviet Union, Kraybill saw this task as a more appropriate function of MWC. He saw church-to-church relations as a world conference function, rather than that of a specialized agency. He began a pattern of visits to the USSR, including church representatives from Latin America, Africa and Europe, and he worked strenuously to insure representation of Russian Baptists and Baptist Mennonites at the 1978, 1984 and 1990 Assemblies.

From its beginning the MWC had facilitated the re-uniting of long-separated relatives. Most assemblies included occasions for remembering a history, which frequently energized the rapidly assimilating Mennonites and Brethren in Christ. But the shift from historians (Neff, Bender, Dyck) providing MWC leadership to a person with long experience as a mission executive inevitably created a new orientation. Even before 1972 missions were an important MWC concern. Now missions were highlighted at a series of consultations held with Europe and North American agencies, beginning in Puerto Rico in 1975.

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90. Quoted from a personal copy widely available through Mennonite World Conference.

Subsequent consultations were held in conjunction with the 1978, 1984 and 1990 assemblies.

At San Juan, Puerto Rico in 1975 the consultation noted "a new and urgent call for those in Western service and mission programs to listen more attentively to the brothers and sisters of Asia, Africa, and Latin America." Mennonites and Brethren in Christ conferences were challenged to "find genuinely mutual structures for developing and sharing our resources of personnel, money, and spiritual gifts, so that together we may carry out our common calling to mission as a worldwide fellowship." The same consultation called attention to the concentration of organizational power and decision making in the North as well as "the domination of the English language and western culture." The consultation findings concluded with a strong appeal for more resources to be applied to leadership training. The essential theme of "mutuality and interdependence" recurred in 1978, 1984, 2000 and will surely surface again.<sup>91</sup>

Kraybill was also keenly aware of the power of information. He began a pattern of news releases to the Mennonite press, initiated a *Newsletter* (Vol I. no. 1, April 1976) and edited a 390-page *Mennonite World Handbook* released at the Tenth Assembly held at Wichita, Kansas in 1978. The *Handbook* included splendid overview articles by three leading scholars: C. J. Dyck, "History of the Mennonite World Conference"; Frank H. Epp "The Migrations of the Mennonites"; and Wilbert R. Shenk, "Growth Through Missions."<sup>92</sup> Reports arrived from each of the continents plus the USSR as well as country-by-country data. The "World Membership Summary" was the first of a series of updates that have continued to the present.<sup>93</sup> The committee also developed guidelines for membership in MWC.

Another significant change illustrating the move to the larger world was the emergence of regional Mennonite conferences. MWC encouraged and frequently raised the travel funds for such meetings. Thus, the Africa Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Fellowship (AMBCF) was formed at Bulawayo, Zimbabwe in 1965, and the Congress Menonitas Latinoamericanos first met in Bogota, Colombia in 1968. The Latin Congress often meets regionally in the Southern cone, the Andean

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91. "The Anabaptist Vision and World Mission." Statement by the expanded MWC Presidium, July 3-5, 1975, San Juan, Puerto Rico.—*MWC Newsletter* 1:2 (July 1976), 4, 6.

92. Paul N. Kraybill, ed., *Mennonite World Handbook: A Survey of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches* (Lombard, IL: MWC, 1978).

93. *Ibid.*, 385-86.

region and Central America. The Asia Mennonite Conference held its first meeting at Dhamtari, M.P. India in 1971. More than 500 from Russia, Ukraine and throughout Western Europe usually attended a European regional conference. Several attempts at developing a North American regional body, however, have not succeeded beyond occasional meetings.<sup>94</sup>

Thus, Paul Kraybill put in place and extended C. J. Dyck's vision of an MWC agency that did more than host assemblies. Kraybill regularly visited churches on all the continents. He participated in the annual meetings of the Secretaries of Christian World communions. More than anyone else he sensed the need to capture the energies of the growing church in Mennonite and Brethren in Christ structures and Mennonite World Conference practice. This became the driving force of MWC for its past quarter of a century.

### BECOMING GLOBAL

The assemblies continued to be MWC's most visible activity.<sup>95</sup> Large gatherings were held in Wichita, Kansas, July 25-30, 1978; Strasbourg, France, July 14-19, 1984; Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, July 24-29, 1990; and Calcutta, India, January 6-12, 1997.

Each of these assemblies was a large convocation. Registration at Wichita was 9530; Strasbourg 7250; Winnipeg 12,764; Calcutta 4500. Meetings were generally held in civic auditoriums, except for Calcutta where a large tent known locally as a "Shamiana" was erected on the grounds of St. Thomas School. Evening and weekend attendance was often much larger, reaching, for example, 25,000 on Sunday morning in the Winnipeg Sports Stadium. Each assembly was increasingly international in participation and tone. Thirty-seven countries were represented at Wichita, fifty at Strasbourg, and sixty-eight at Winnipeg and Calcutta, with Mennonites and Baptists from the USSR (now Russia) participating at each assembly.

The themes of these gatherings were significant expressions of faith: *The Kingdom of God in a Changing World* (1978); *God's People Serve in Hope* (1984); *Witnessing to Christ in Today's World* (1990); *Hear What the Spirit Is Saying to the Churches* (1997). Nevertheless, these assemblies were much more celebrative in character than theologically explorative. Music featured prominently, both congregational and

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94. See the relevant articles on these bodies in *ME* 5.

95. This section is based not only on the MWC minutes, reports and publications but also on the files and experience of the authors in MWC activities.

special presentations by individuals and groups from all continents. Choirs from Congo, Mexico, Netherlands, Brazil, Guatemala, Switzerland, USSR, India and Indonesia circulated after these meetings to many local congregations. The songbooks produced for these assemblies were increasingly international in character. A number of new hymns or newly translated ones have become part of the Mennonite congregational repertoire.<sup>96</sup>

MWC presidents, pastors and theological leaders gave the major addresses, with more women appearing at the podium with each assembly. In 1984 American Professor Ronald Sider's address at Strasbourg calling for a large body of volunteers to form a nonviolent peacemaking force to stand between warring parties as a new means of resolving conflict,<sup>97</sup> led to the formation of the Christian Peacemaker Teams in 1987. Each of these assemblies featured numerous displays celebrating the arts. Already the gathering at Amsterdam in 1967 had offered a rich display of early Mennonitica, which was recorded in a published catalog. At Wichita, Mennonite and Brethren in Christ artists mounted an exhibit of visual arts, primarily North American in origin.<sup>98</sup> At Calcutta the unusual character and gifts of representative churches from each continent were skillfully and beautifully visualized in a "Global Village" spread out on the assembly grounds.

The first commissioned drama, I. Merle Good's *These People Mine*, was presented at Curitiba in 1972. Robert Hostetter's *Cheyenne Jesus Buffalo Dream* was well received at the Wichita assembly. New films were introduced at each assembly, as well as video-taping of the assemblies themselves.

As the assemblies became more fellowship-oriented and celebrative in character, some began to call them a "people's congress." Decision-making increasingly became the task of the general council. The 25 members (18 from Europe and North America) representing 13 countries in 1976 grew to 102 members (25 from Europe and North America) and 47 countries in 2000. The council continued to meet at the time of the assembly and between meetings in Kenya, Paraguay, Zimbabwe and Guatemala City. The executive committee grew from 7 (3 North and 4

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96. Especially noteworthy is Doreen Helen Klassen, ed., *International Songbook* (Carol Stream, IL: MWC, 1990). Each assembly since 1957 has had its own song books. The Winnipeg collection extended the Wichita collection with songs from 29 countries. The words in these books appeared in English, French, German and Spanish.

97. *Proceedings MWC Assembly XI, Strasbourg, 1984* (Lombard, IL: MWC, 1984), 250-52.

98. Ethel Abrahams, comp., *Visual Arts* (Lombard, IL: MWC, n.d.). Sixty-six artists were represented in the Wichita Exhibit.

South) to 14 members (4 North and 10 South) and conducted their annual meetings in a variety of locations from Taiwan to Honduras. The first women named to the general council in the 1970s were Jo von Ingen Schenau-Elsen of the Netherlands, Winifred Beechy of the U.S. and Louise Nussbaumer of France.

### *Leadership*

These meetings as well as the assemblies were chaired by the respective presidents: Milion Belete of Ethiopia, 1973-1978; Charles Christano of Indonesia, 1978-1984; Ross T. Bender of North America, 1984-1990; Raul Garcia of Argentina, 1990-1997; Mesach Krisetya of Indonesia, 1997-2003. The council and executive committee addressed a great variety of topics.

One persistent concern was finances. With a salaried secretariat, fixed costs increased. Following the mid-1980s there were periods of deficit financing, especially after the Winnipeg Assembly when income was \$300,000 less than projected. The executive secretary spent an increasing amount of time in fund-raising. Some congregations and conferences began to include MWC in their budgets, but as the annual budget grew from \$100,000 in 1980 to \$500,000 in 1999, more support was required from individual contributors. Assemblies were and are expensive, resulting in the large travel fund begun in 1967 to support representation from the majority churches in the South.

As a means of insuring that the rapidly growing churches of the South would be equally represented with the older, established churches of the North and West, membership in the council was revised in 1976 and 1990. The older churches, who carry with them longer history, also provide a disproportionate share of the financial resources, a disequilibrium that will likely be with MWC a long time, particularly since the organization has become the primary focal point of interest for churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

In 1995 MWC established the Global Church Sharing Fund, with initial sizable contributions from MCC to commemorate its seventy-fifth anniversary and from Mennonite Mutual Aid in recognition of its fiftieth anniversary in the same year. Together these organizations contributed \$900,000 for use by MWC and the churches of the South. The general council's wisdom was tested as it developed strategies for distributing these funds to member conferences "to build up the church."<sup>99</sup> Ten

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99. Global Church Sharing Fund Report. Minutes of the General Council, July, 2000, 17-23.

percent was designated for the global Gift Sharing Project launched in 2000. Some of the undispersed monies have served MWC as an interim endowment.

By the time Paul Kraybill retired as executive secretary in 1990, MWC was indeed becoming an organization representing Mennonite and Brethren in Christ conferences worldwide. Kraybill's successor Larry Miller, also an American, with training in theology and New Testament studies at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and the University of Strasbourg, also had fifteen years of experience as a church worker in Europe under the Mennonite Board of Missions and MCC. Miller brought strong language skills, theological understanding and a deep commitment to enabling the new Mennonite majority to make its voice clear and understandable. He has also added theological depth and has sensitively steered MWC toward a more truly global character.

More and more MWC work is being carried on between assemblies by staff, special committees and task forces. The general council became a designated body (Faith and Life, Peace) for special tasks that usually include some resource people named by member churches. In 1988 the Faith and Life Committee developed a liturgical statement of faith for the Assembly at Winnipeg. Later, the reconstituted Faith and Life Council asked Arnold Snyder of Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo to provide a fresh, simply written summary of Anabaptist thought. *From Anabaptist Seed* (1999) was quickly accepted and translated into five other languages. At Calcutta MWC sponsored a consultation on theological education.

In the early 1990s Mennonite and Brethren in Christ historians began to ask what the new reality, a worldwide church, meant for the writing of history. After a 1995 conference at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary they proposed a Global Mennonite History Project to MWC. MWC endorsed the project at Calcutta and named a twelve-person organizing committee for oversight. New, pioneering histories telling the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ story from the perspective of the churches in the South are anticipated for publication beginning in 2003.

Another particularly active subgroup of MWC has been the International Mennonite Peace Committee. Initially formed at a meeting called after the 1936 conference at Fredeshiem in the Netherlands by Dutch peace advocates T. O. Hylkema and Jacob ter Meulen and by Americans Harold S. Bender and Orié O. Miller, the committee was revived again in Holland in 1949. It received a new impetus at Curitiba in 1972 but became more active after the Wichita assembly in 1979. In 1985 it became a MWC sub-committee and in 1997 was renamed as the

Peace Council. This committee published Canadian theologian Helmut Harder's *The Biblical Way of Peace* (1982) based on lectures given at the Nairobi General Council Meeting in 1981. Committee Secretary Urbane Peachey also edited a series of papers given at Peace Committee MWC events between 1979 to 1987, *The Role of the Church in Society: An International Perspective* (1988). Under the leadership of Paulus Widjaja from Indonesia and Judy Zimmerman Herr from the MCC peace office, the Peace Council published an insightful series of addresses given at Calcutta, *Reflections on our Contexts* (1997). These booklets included statements on peace made in a variety of contexts and occasions, and illustrate the dynamic expressions of peacemaking appropriate to a diverse global church.

MWC has been blessed by a series of able writers and editors who have produced news stories, the *Newsletter* 1976-1984, occasional *Bulletins* 1984-1985, and then the quarterly *Courier* since early 1986. The *Newsletter* began having English and Spanish translation side by side in 1980. The *Courier* went further with a Spanish edition known as *Correo*. The French *Courier* began in 2000. The biannual *Mennonite and Brethren in Christ World Directory*, begun in 1974, has become an indispensable source of addresses and membership statistics. The 1994 *World Directory* marked the moment when Mennonites in the South surpassed the North in numbers. In 1925 the largest Mennonite churches were in the USSR, USA, Canada and Netherlands. By the year 2000 the top four were USA, Congo, Canada and India. Another notable contribution was the 1990 *Mennonite World Handbook* edited by Diether Gotz Lichdi. Fifty pages larger than the 1978 edition, it was subtitled "Mennonites in Global Witness" and included more than 100 pages of stories and experience from the worldwide churches.

### *Inter-Church Contacts*

The participation of the executive secretaries in annual meetings of the Secretaries of World Christian Communions helped to bring ecumenical relationships to increased MWC attention. Since the 1920s executives from a number of denominations have met together in order to share information, encourage each other and demonstrate the inter-relatedness of all Christian groups. Thanks to these meetings of World Christian Communions, a number of churches have engaged in in-depth conversations about the essence of their individual traditions, the tensions existing between some of them and how they might mutually affirm each other's witness and calling.

The World Alliance of Reformed churches initiated the first conversations with MWC at the time of the Strasbourg Assembly in 1984, with a follow-up meeting in 1989. A second set of conversations was held with the Baptist World Alliance from 1989 to 1992, with a sequel in January 2002. The most highly publicized conversations have been five sessions with the Roman Catholic Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity between 1998 and 2002.

Alongside these formal conversations were a series of meetings, begun in 1986 and called the Prague Consultations, between the other peace churches and "first Reformation" churches such as the Waldensians, the Moravians and Hussite Church. There have been five additional meetings, the last in January 2000, with one more concluding session for November 2003. MWC has also held preliminary conversations with the Lutheran World Federation.

In each of these conversations a primary goal has been simply to learn to know each other and to develop a mutual regard for the contribution of each tradition. Each tradition's strengths and weaknesses have been explored and locally based conversations have been encouraged. One especially troublesome topic concerns Mennonite memories of persecutions and the fact that some confessions of faith that condemned Anabaptists in the past have not been formally rescinded. There are also, of course, deep differences in theology and ethical practice. The final report of the MWC-WARC conversations summarized the differences apparent in all the conversations:

While there is convergence on the role of the church, differences remain as to its nature, and on the terms most appropriately to express it. . . . It would seem that the Reformed tend to have a more social understanding of the catholicity of the church, while the Mennonites tend rather to emphasize the discipleship of believers in the context of commitment to community.<sup>100</sup>

As MWC has become more global and has gained experience as an operational body representing all the churches of the global Mennonite and BIC family, its role and character have become more assertive. On the one hand, this has meant providing space for the new majority churches to express their points of view among the Northern church agencies who long directed programs from northern addresses. On the other hand, the expectations of the majority church for this global body

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100. Ross T. Bender and Alan P. F. Sell, eds., *Baptism, Peace, and the State in the Reformed and Mennonite Traditions* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier U. Press, 1991). This quotation is from the "findings of the participants," p. 237.

also required a stronger foundation than the notion of fellowship alone. It took 25 years for C. J. Dyck's reflection on the weakness of fellowship as a functional concept before MWC leadership began to outline a new rationale based on the notion of communion.

### *From Conference to Communion*

Many worldwide church bodies are in the midst of major self-studies. How does the church organize itself when the majority of its membership is desperately poor but thriving while organizational power rests with those with a long history and greater financial resources? Mennonite World Conference becomes the primary locus where these tensions are focused in the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ world. Euro-American agencies are rooted in their own constituencies—only a few Mennonite and BIC bodies have incorporated churches in the South into their own structures. Where can accountability to the southern churches be structured into the systems of northern church agencies?

At the 1999 meeting of the MWC executive committee President Mesach Krisetya posed the question sharply. "In the era of globalization," he noted, "we as an international Mennonite organization are called to provide 'space' that makes power-sharing possible. How can we as a global Mennonite organization make this possible?"<sup>101</sup>

The Council of International Ministries (CIM), composed of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ mission agencies, explored this issue with MWC leaders at a meeting January 23, 1999 and again at the Global Anabaptist Missions Consultation at Guatemala City, July 18-15, 2000. The most that has been achieved until now is a higher level of consciousness of the issues at stake and a commitment to continue the search for new structures. The CIM has proposed the formation of a Global Mission Fellowship facilitated by the MWC. Mesach Krisetya and Larry Miller, addressing the CIM, expressed the conviction that if the church is universal, members or structures that operate independently at any level handicap the body and impair the church's mission.<sup>102</sup>

Meanwhile MWC has worked in a deliberate fashion with MCC to develop processes for structured mutual accountability. Already in 1967 C. J. Dyck proposed an exchange of minutes, attendance at each other's meetings and consultation on any issues that involve both parties. MCC

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101. John A. Lapp's personal notes from that meeting held in Bandungan, Indonesia, July 1999.

102. Mesach Krisetya and Larry Miller, "The Role of Mennonite World Conference in Global Mission. Jan. 23, 1999."—Unpublished manuscript, p. 4.

has for more than a decade included MWC in its annual budget. In 1995 the MWC and MCC developed a "Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation" premised not only on many shared experiences but also on the reality that "MWC has a global accountability structure; MCC has a global infrastructure."<sup>103</sup> A similar discussion with Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA) is underway.

If global organizational accountability is difficult, the practice of church itself is also difficult. The New Testament word that defines church life as community is the Greek term "koinonia." How is koinonia embodied in a congregation that exists on six continents, in 10,000 local meetings with more than a million members? This is a particularly difficult question regarding a peoplehood who read the Bible in more than 100 languages and whose worship styles vary widely, based on a variety of cultural experiences.

Executive Secretary Larry Miller notes that "MWC has moved beyond existence as an occasional world gathering. But what is it becoming? One word that helps describe the emerging direction towards sharing life and sharing convictions is 'communion.'" In an article in the *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch 2000* entitled "MWC: 'Communion' on the Way Between Local Church and Church Universal," Miller explained that communion is not only "living together in structures of solidarity but also sharing life in structures of authority and accountability." Thus, communion is much more than organizational. "Communion is a gift of God." The globalization of the church, he noted, should be an occasion for gratitude. "This historic event provides an opportunity to live more concretely and more visibly as part of the 'church universal,' an essential dimension of the body of Christ which Congregationalists often deny, neglect, or spiritualize."<sup>104</sup>

Renewal of vision, revision of structures and restatement of purpose somehow found themselves on the agenda of nearly every executive committee and general council sessions in the 1990s. Staff and officers wrote reflective pieces. Step by step a MWC for the twenty-first century became more visible. The long-term goal was stated clearly in a statement developed by the General Council in 1993, "Being Anabaptist Christians Today:"

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103. The MCC Executive Committee approved the original memorandum in April 1995. MWC approved it in Calcutta in January 1997 for a six-year period. There is an addendum "Mutual Expectations Between MWC and MCC" dated April 1995.

104. Quotations are from an English translation distributed to the MWC Executive Committee at Bandung, Indonesia, July 1999.

Interdependence requires change (metanoia), but in what ways is yet unclear. The process of maturity and independence from parent missions in affluent countries is long and painful, but we commit ourselves toward the goal of interdependence. We envision Mennonite World Conference as a worldwide body of Anabaptist churches whose spiritual gifts and resources are shared as equals among equals. We envision a flow of communication and fellowship, church to church, within regions and across regions to link visions and missions around the world. We envision a way of working together to meet mutual needs by sharing ideas and concrete resources.<sup>105</sup>

There has been further exploration at subsequent meetings. At Guatemala City in July 2000 the General Council decided that “future direction, identity and purpose are of sufficient seriousness that a commission with the exclusive purpose of addressing these questions is now needed.” Such a commission of nine members—one from each continent, two from the executive committee and two consultants—was named and is currently at work. Based on surveys of member churches, much research and listening to what the Spirit has to say in this new century, the commission will “develop a statement of vision, mission, objectives, and goals; suggest what kind of global organization best fits the vision; and outline a plan of implementation.”<sup>106</sup> The commission’s final report is expected at the fourteenth assembly scheduled for Bulawayo, Zimbabwe in August 2003.

### CONCLUSION

This history is primarily an organizational overview; as such it has hardly begun to capture all the dimensions of change between the one hundred German speakers at Basel in 1925 and the polyglot crowd in the 1997 Calcutta Shamiana. These changes are far more substantial than numbers, geography or mere organizational development. The change in language usage alone—from German dominance to the hegemony of English and now the dozens of languages used in worship—illustrates the extraordinary diversity of the contemporary Mennonite family.

We are well aware that the transition from Euro-American to global, as well as from conference to communion, represents profound change

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105. Quotation from “Future of MWC: Review of Discussions, 1997-2000,” doc. 5a. MWC General Council, Guatemala City, July 17-23, 2000.

106. Recommendation: Appointment of a Planning Commission, doc. 5 c., MWC General Council, Guatemala City, 17-23 July 2000.

in Mennonite and Brethren in Christ self-understanding, particularly in the context of massive changes in twentieth-century society, culture, theology and religious practice. Two decades ago the German Mennonite historian Hans-Jurgen Goertz suggested that these changes have created a crisis of "legitimization and identity" as "Mennonites' cognitive center was dissolved . . . nontraditional viewpoints have flooded and are struggling with one another to become the determiner of the new center."<sup>107</sup> We can only note that MWC is a primary arena where this struggle is now engaged. The work of the Faith and Life Council has been a creative response both theologically and ecclesialogically to the tendencies to fragment. The difficulties MWC has had in reorganizing itself to include the new majority and the difficulties of developing a solid financial base for a worldwide structure represent the visible dimensions of deeper issues. The very name "Mennonite" has become somewhat problematic. Not only are Brethren in Christ long-time participants, but there are numerous conferences in Asia, Africa and Latin America who do not use the rubric Mennonite or Brethren in Christ. During the years ahead MWC may well choose a new name for itself.

Although Mennonite World Conference continues to serve a profoundly important role in the developing sense of fraternity and mutuality, the organization and the movement towards greater unity are precariously situated. MWC is highly dependent on some sort of world order. It is dependent on the convictions of member churches that global inter-church relationships are essential to being a faithful church. In a world of lopsided prosperity and power, MWC can only function when the poor majority has a wholesome patience and the prosperous minority has a self-critical conscience.

It is a remarkable work of God's Spirit that MWC works as well as it does. Executive Secretary Paul Kraybill in 1986 did not exaggerate the satisfaction Mennonites in all their diversity find in MWC:

There is a certain mystique and magnetism in the Mennonite World Conference that is hard to explain . . . it has become the ultimate expression of our identity, and a most coveted spot for visibility and exposure. . . . The need for a global body, not tied to one nation or

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107. Hans-Jurgen Goertz, "The Confessional Heritage in its New Mold. What is Mennonite Self-Understanding Today?" in Calvin W. Redekop and Samuel S. Steiner, eds., *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Lanham, MD: U. Press of America, 1988), 5.

continent, is well received; and the role of the MWC as a non-North American advocate for the total global community is respected.<sup>108</sup>

Surely when pioneer China church member James Liu and Guatemala church leader Leonor de Mende addressed the Winnipeg Assembly; when 3500 Indian Mennonites convened at the Calcutta Assembly, singing the theme song written by one of their own leaders, Shant Kunjum; when President Mesach Krisetya from Indonesia and Vice President Bedru Hussein from Ethiopia addressed congregations in Germany, the Netherlands, Canada and the United States; when Henk Kossen from the Netherlands and Ross T. Bender from North America interpreted substantive theological issues in several assemblies; when thousands of people read MWC stories in the *Courier/Correo/Courier*—something unique is happening. A new community of faith is being born. The Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako considers the newly realized worldwide body of Christ to be the beginning of a new Christian history where Christians—we can specify Mennonites—everywhere are brought “into the experience of shared space for self-expression, the experience of community.”<sup>109</sup>

The church, a community of people covenanting together, has been the essence of Brethren in Christ and Mennonite understanding of the Christian gospel. Creating community for an expanding church has been the role and the goal of MWC since its beginnings. The task is as crucial at the beginning of the twenty-first century as it was 75 years ago. A new identity is still being formed. The context and style will no doubt be as different 75 years hence as the present is from MWC’s beginnings in 1925. But then and now, as in 1925 and 1525, MWC will surely testify: “No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (I. Cor. 3:1).

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108. Quoted by Robert S. Kreider, “MWC: Which Directions for the Future?” *Courier*, Third Quarter (1986), 10.

109. Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 167.



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