

Hispanic Mennonites in North America

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Rafael Falcon, author of a history of Hispanic Mennonites in North America until 1982, wrote of the origins of the Hispanic Mennonite Church. Falcon affirmed that the establishment of the Mennonite Board of Charities in 1890, its later merger with the Mennonite Board of Evangelization, and the establishment of the Chicago Home Mission, were fundamental components for the emerging of the Hispanic Mennonite Church.¹ This board started its missionary work overseas and sent missionaries to India in 1899 and to Argentina in 1917. The missionary work among Hispanics in the United States was characterized by the individual effort of people that came into relationship with Spanish via Argentina and through the Chicago Home Mission. These contacts did not arise from a planned North American missionary agenda or vision.

Hispanic Mennonites

In 1982 when the Hispanic Mennonites celebrated their 50th anniversary, they had approximately fifty-two congregations in all of North America. Today, nineteen years later, 130 churches are evidence of growth. Having almost tripled their numbers in two decades, the Hispanic Mennonites became the largest minority group in the Mennonite Church. (These numbers do not include Mennonite Brethren and Brethren in Christ.) Over the next ten years, the numbers may double once again.

The efforts of Hispanic congregations and leaders primarily account for this growth. In the last ten years the Mennonite Church (MC) conferences and the General Conference (GC) district conferences have shown a greater interest in evangelistic work in urban areas of greater Hispanic concentration.

Hispanic Mennonites in North America can be divided into three groups. One group represents Mexican-Americans who lived in the American Southwest before the United States defeated Mexico in war (1846-48) and annexed these lands. This kind of Hispanic can be found in many places in the U.S., but mostly in the states bordering with Mexico. Texas and California are places where this group is most fully developed with its own subculture and its counter-cultural relationship to the dominant Anglo culture.

¹Rafael Falcon, *The Hispanic Mennonite Church in North America 1932-1982* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985), 20.

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Another group comes from the first generation of immigrants who came to the United States more than fifty years ago from other Spanish-speaking countries. These folk established themselves in urban areas, bringing along their cultural and social systems. They speak the Spanish language as a means of maintaining identity and resisting the dominant culture. This is also true for the most recent immigrants who came to the U.S. as adults and want to hold onto their defining cultural characteristics.

A third group consists of the second and third generation of immigrants. These folk have been culturally assimilated and communicate better in English. They are less attached to the cultural inheritance expressed through the use of language. They prefer to make a social separation between their professional and religious life on one hand, and their relationship with their extended "Hispanic" family on the other hand. They leave the use of the Spanish language to private life. Some even prefer the English phonetic pronunciation of their names.

The Hispanic Mennonite church is formed by these three kinds of people. It is possible to find congregations with fourteen to eighteen different nationalities, all of which are cut across by complex intergenerational issues and difficulties. There are also Mexican-American congregations marked by an indistinct and mixed use of English and Spanish. The language transition involves loss of a vital cultural point of reference. The changes often require a great effort of pastoral reconciliation. The church can also be a vital point of reference. It can be a place where the immigrant confirms identity and values in the light of faith, theology, and worship.

Because Hispanic Mennonite congregations are nurtured through continuing immigration, their complete insertion into the global frame of the Mennonite Church in North America represents an ongoing dilemma. One need is for an adequate historical understanding of the way congregations evolve from gestation to full development. These congregations need to be seen within the general frame of the Mennonite Church, rather than according to an outmoded missionary paradigm. Hispanic Mennonites are not merely a reflection of someone's missionary action. They are themselves a community mission, making an impressive contribution to the development of the church among Spanish-speaking people.

Mennonite historians who have written in English literally ignore them. When they mention the "Hispanics," they do it in the frame of missionary efforts without highlighting the evident fruitful development among the Hispanic churches themselves. Paul Toews, in volume four of the *Mennonite Experience in America*, dedicated only three lines under the topic of "Mennonites and the Civil Rights Movement," to highlight the MC

mission in Chicago in 1934 and the Mennonite Brethren in Texas in 1937.² At the time Toews wrote, there were more than fifty Hispanic churches flourishing in different parts of North America. In the most recent and comprehensive compilation of information about Mennonites in the United States, titled *Anabaptist World USA*, Hispanic Mennonites are absent from the index, from the narrative description of groups, as well as from the extensive listing of church groups, conferences and associations.³

The Hispanic Mennonites need to be recognized as part of the church and not as a missionary appendix, a linguistic rarity, or just an ethnic group that is photographed in order to get the attention of the English speaking church. We need an inclusive vocabulary to make clear that Anabaptist Mennonitism is not primarily a cultural patrimony. It is rather an expression of faith and theology that prompts a new and inclusive family identity with a shared communion and multicultural pilgrimage. Hispanic Mennonites should not have to battle so hard to be accepted into American society, and into the family of faith where they are claimed by Christ.

The Hispanic Mennonites are part of the Mennonite Church in North America. Since the 1930s they have become part of the historic journey of the Mennonite church. Furthermore, their arrival and participation in the Mennonite family has brought changes to that family. When the church carries out its missionary task, it conquers for Christ. At the same time it is conquered by Christ through the ones that were evangelized. Only in this way can the church be reconciling and at the same time be left reconciled.

An Anabaptist-Mennonite Community with a New Surname

The entry of Hispanic people into the Mennonite stream is a matter of immigrants encountering immigrants. The early missionaries were rural folk who had migrated from rural areas to Chicago, the great city of the North American Midwest. Mennonite historians have shown the connection of Mennonite evangelism and church planting to the process of migration.⁴ This is also true for Hispanic Mennonite history. Mennonites from Europe who move to the urban environment, and Latin Americans who come to the United States in search of a better destiny, come together in the great city in order to begin a significant ecclesial pilgrimage. This image of mutual migration can help us see Mennonite migrations - both German background Mennonites and Latin background Mennonites - with different eyes.

²Paul Toews, *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970: Modernity and the Persistence of Religious Community* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996), 255.

³Donald B. Kraybill and C. Nelson Hostetter, *Anabaptist World USA* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001). Although otherwise ignored in this book, Hispanic Mennonites are portrayed in one photograph (45), and in one quotation at the head of a chapter (129).

⁴Toews, *Mennonites*, 227.

The first new Hispanic Mennonite surname was Leon. Indeed, at this writing, the first Hispanic Mennonite baptized in Chicago (in 1932) is still living - Ignacia Leon. The Leon family was the main group that began the first Hispanic Mennonite church. It has been a long journey from that beginning for Hispanic Mennonites to reach the characteristics of their own identity. Some of the highlights of that journey were the following:

The leaders of the Hispanic Mennonites at the beginning were all Anglos, who earlier had been exposed to the Latin American culture. The relationship of the leaders from the two groups was important for development of the church.

From 1940 to 1960 Hispanic churches were established in Texas, Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio and Iowa. The Anglo leaders did not have a centralized plan to help create a feeling of belonging and identity. They needed a progressive plan for orderly development that would reflect the values of Anabaptist theology without suppressing the social group culture.

The wider American struggle for civil rights in the 1960s awakened minorities to prevailing social injustice. The Mennonite church reflected the dominant culture. Minority groups within the church had to start their own struggle to redefine their relationship. This struggle explains some of the obstacles that still affect the relationships of these groups to the rest of the church.

Eventually some new organizations opened space for greater Hispanic participation - the Urban Racial Council, Minorities Ministries Council, etc. The first Hispanic in a prominent place in a Mennonite agency was Lupe De Leon from Mathis, Texas. He served as executive secretary for the Hispanics.

The Hispanic Mennonite community has not yet completed the process of gaining full acceptance as participants and representatives in the denomination. If there are to be changes of attitude that look toward a more inclusive future, a more critical historical analysis is necessary.

Complexity of Majority-Minority Relations

Relationship between majority and minority groups are very complex. The majority exercises and perpetuates its power through its control of money as well as through the "hidden rules of the group" which ensure certain results. The majority constructs its own history in ways that perpetuate the marginality of the minority. The majority can make decisions without taking diversity and the problems of dependence into consideration. Problems of racism can afflict majority-minority relationships. Racism affects the minds and imaginations of the majority, and can be internalized by the minority. Racism is reflected in church business and structures.

There are important differences of ambiguity and clarity in the approaches of the majority and the minority. When possibilities emerge for starting a new congregation, the Hispanics are inclined to "just do it," while the Anglos hesitate until they have a master plan in place. It is important for the problem of racism and its consequences to be discussed more openly.

Relevance of Anabaptism in a Hispanic Perspective

Hispanics tend to associate Mennonitism with a cultural emphasis that clashes with their own culture. Mennonitism is associated with ethnocentricity rather than with the Christian gospel. On the other hand, Hispanics tend to consider Anabaptist theology as a valid approach to the great challenges of faith and practice. They associate Anabaptism with a heritage of bravery and heroism by common people who testified to their faith.

For Hispanics the name "Mennonite" acquires meaning when it associated with a biblical theology and appeals to biblical values. Even so, "Mennonite" is not a word that generates passion among the Hispanics. Those Hispanics who do use "Mennonite" in their church name have had the advantage of more direct contact with Anabaptist theology. For Hispanics, Anabaptist theology creates a historical bridge between the present and its dilemmas and the past with its lessons and learning. However, it is not an exclusive theology. Hispanic Mennonite-Anabaptists tend to incorporate Anabaptism in an eclectic way with other theologies and with other ways of church celebration and administration. Even so, they continue to affirm their attachment to Anabaptist theology.

Unresolved Challenges

There are challenges to the formation of Anabaptist identity among the Hispanics in North America. Hispanics need theological education and training, but their access to Anabaptist theological formation is hindered by barriers of language, private formal education, family and finances. Mennonite educational institutions were created to serve the dominant group, and use the hidden rules of the dominant group. They reflect the dominant culture and, as experienced by Hispanics, are rigid or harsh in their approach to the educational process.

The full incorporation of Hispanics into the denominational life of the Mennonite church remains to be achieved. Imposing cultural differences in ways of doing business must be transcended. The dichotomy between "our business" and "their business" must be resolved.

Conclusion

The church history of Anabaptist Mennonites in North America must be responsible and objectively honest. It cannot ignore its multicultural components. The history of North American Mennonites in a global context should recognize the achievement of missionary evangelism by the predominant group. It also should recognize, if belatedly, the existence of the Hispanic Mennonite church, as well as other minority groups. And it should describe the ways that Mennonites have been changed by their multicultural experience.

The global history of North American Mennonitism must be inclusive in intention, form, and style. It must analyze critically the issues raised by the Hispanic community. The names of people and events among Hispanic Mennonite-Anabaptists must be recognized at the same level as the names of the dominant group. The history must reflect the Hispanic struggles for their right to an Anabaptist-Mennonite identity. It must acknowledge the achievements as well as the dilemmas and challenges that have not yet been resolved. The role of Mennonite church agencies and institutions must be critiqued. If this history is to build a bridge connecting majority and minority groups in the church, it must not be a neutral or amorphous chronicle. It should have all the vitality of vigorous narrative, analysis, and critical debate.