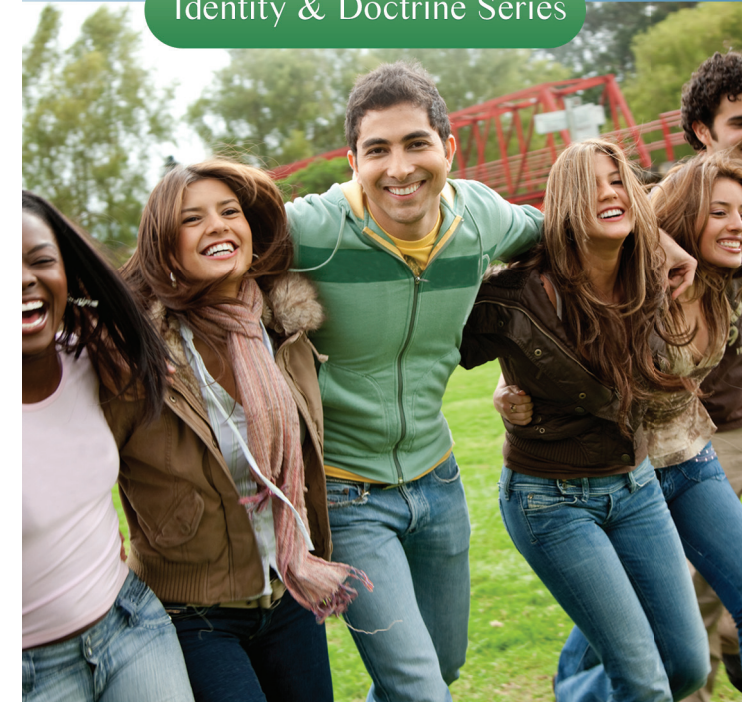


# Mennonite Brethren: Tell Me About Them

Identity & Doctrine Series



draw very good delegate participation and strong support. Support for Canadian conference and for joint Canada-United States conference projects has normally been good, too, especially for overseas missions.

To illustrate: Canadian Mennonite Brethren have carried the work of mission and church extension boards in five provinces. They have Bible or Christian liberal arts colleges in four provinces and secondary schools in three provinces. They have a radio ministry that reaches around the world and camping programs in a half-dozen or more settings. They support seminary training and do overseas mission work through Mennonite Brethren Mission and Service International (MBMS International). All of this and much more is done through official conference support. To accomplish this has required the generous financial support of many members, usually well above an average of \$1,000 per member per year. Many are equally generous with their time.

Names like Bethany Bible College of Hepburn, Sask., Camp Crossroads at Torrance, Ont., Family Life Network of Winnipeg, or the Mennonite Educational Institute of Abbotsford, B.C., have a familiar ring to Mennonite Brethren because they are so widely supported.

In addition, Mennonite Brethren are active partners in the work of MCC at provincial, Canadian, and international levels. Many churches can claim current or former volunteers in their ranks, people who've spent years in service assignments with MCC. Within their congregations, these people help keep alive a vision for Christ-like service to a suffering world.

In addition, there are many programs of an inter-denominational nature, especially those linked to others of evangelical or Mennonite persuasion, in which Mennonite Brethren are actively involved. Church members can also be found at work in virtually every professional group, occupation,

and workplace, living out their calling as followers of Christ.

Open the pages of the *MB Herald*, the national publication of the Canadian conference, and you'll quickly sense the impulses that unite this denomination. The roots in the Anabaptist spiritual tradition are clearly there. Ours is a history which has included great suffering (think of the people who were murdered or exiled in the Former Soviet Union), a thirst for vital and lively relationship with God (from the earliest beginning to recent renewal movements), and a keen desire to connect Christianity to the culture in which we live. The eagerness to share Christ is obvious. And so is the sense that we are more than thousands of individuals who attend churches of the same denomination—we are communities of believers. Furthermore, every edition of the *MB Herald* reflects the commitment to work together at ministries or tasks that are larger than any of our congregations can assume alone.

It is easy to paint an idealized picture of a church or denomination. We often fail. We struggle to hold onto precious doctrines and values. Yet we have much for which to praise God.

Mennonite Brethren began out of a longing for a renewed encounter with God and transformed living. Where that is found in Mennonite Brethren churches today, they have become places of invitation to all who enter their doors. You may be seeking such a church. Test the one in your neighbourhood. If it represents such Christianity, why not consider becoming a part of it? ■

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Written by Harold Jantz, former editor of the *MB Herald* and *ChristianWeek*.

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Faith and Life

# Mennonite Brethren: Tell Me About Them

In 1902, when Mennonite Brethren wrote their first major confession of faith, they made a point of saying they embraced the historic creeds of the church. Then they went on to describe what distinguished them from others. Why did they do that?

Mennonite Brethren want to be known as a denomination that stands in the broad stream of historic Christianity; but, as a wing of the Anabaptist movement, they also want to be known for what they distinctly contribute to the witness of the larger Christian church.

Today, congregations of Mennonite Brethren are found in more than 20 countries of the world. Remarkably, the largest conferences are located in India and Congo, a testimony to the missionary impulse that has nurtured the Mennonite Brethren since their origins in southern Russia in 1860. In fact, they embrace between a quarter and a fifth of the worldwide Anabaptist community largely because of that missionary activity.

At the turn of the millennium, at a time when the markers for many denominations have become blurred, do Mennonite Brethren stand for anything in particular? We believe they do.

As a denomination that was cradled in Anabaptism, but stimulated by missionary Pietist influences and challenged by the vigour of visiting evangelical leaders, Mennonite Brethren, from their beginning, were a fellowship who reflected an encounter between different influences.

To begin to describe Mennonite Brethren, we might say they have always been anchored by an evangelical and Anabaptist core that has

nurtured life together. What does that core represent?

## What's at the Core?

For one, it means a simple biblicism. In many settings, the question asked has been: "What does the Bible say?" When the writing of the current confession of faith was happening, the attempt—consistently—was to echo the language of the Scriptures in ways that address the world in which we live.

It means that Christ is seen as the centre and source of our life. For Mennonite Brethren, the Bible is never read as though every part carries the same authority. Rather, we understand it to be read through the eyes of the New Testament, because Christ has come as God's ultimate self-disclosure. Furthermore, Christ is both our Saviour and the model of how we are to live. When we find our life in him, we are disciples, serving him by serving others.

It means we see the church as a community of faith. Entrance into its membership occurs through confession of faith in Christ and baptism upon that confession. In that community, people are accountable to one another. Our congregational church government grows out of that sense of accountability. So also does our obligation to attempt to live so our personal witness does not compromise the witness of others within the church. We see ourselves responsible to support and encourage others in their journey of faith. We cannot become mature believers without other parts of the body of Christ. The notion of a people of God distinct from our society puts us in a tension with the kingdoms of this world.

We see the gospel as good news. When we put our faith in Christ, a process of transformation takes place. Certainly, we believe that such faith gives us reason to believe that we will one day spend eternity in heaven. But much more, it

removes the barriers between God and ourselves. It gives us peace within, and it sets us on a path of living as reconciled people in our world. We become peacemakers, no longer at war with God, ourselves, or the world around us.

We see ourselves as people with an urgent calling. We are called to witness to the presence of Christ in our lives. The evangelical impulse has been strong among Mennonite Brethren from the beginning. It is little wonder that within the first half-century of their history, they had come to embrace a fifth of the Mennonite population in Russia, that their leaders helped give birth to the Baptist movement of that country, that missionaries were soon sent out to India and Africa, and that many hundreds of missionaries and evangelists have come from their midst in the years since. In all but a handful of the countries in which Mennonite Brethren churches are found today, they came about because of the witness of missionaries. The desire to plant new churches and be involved in seeing friends and neighbours come to know Christ has strongly characterized Mennonite Brethren.

## Many Ethnic Backgrounds

Being a Mennonite does not mean being part of a certain ethnic group. The church lives by the conviction that God loves all people and that every congregation is to become a home for those of any background who come to faith in Christ. Today, many congregations have embraced people of a wide range of ethnic and religious backgrounds. You can't claim that certain names are "Mennonite" and others aren't in a Mennonite Brethren church, even though the church had its origins in a German-speaking, Russian setting.

Mennonite Brethren have been anchored by an evangelical and Anabaptist core that has nurtured their life together.

Despite their relatively small numbers in Canada, Mennonite Brethren are well known to the wider Christian community. They are the second largest of the Mennonite church constituencies in Canada, and because of their active involvement within the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada as well as within Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), they have built strong relationships in both directions.

From their early Canadian beginnings in Manitoba in the late 1880s, Mennonite Brethren have spread out across the country, with the largest grouping of churches in British Columbia and smaller groupings in Manitoba, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta, Quebec, and Atlantic Canada. In British Columbia, where Mennonite Brethren have nearly 100 churches, they have become known as one of the strongest evangelical communities in the province.

In recent years, efforts of the national church to support church growth where Mennonites are few have concentrated especially on Quebec, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick. The conference has also embraced the idea of naming certain cities for special church-planting attention and Calgary was recently chosen for such a focus. The goal was to plant 10 churches there in five years. As Canadian Mennonite Brethren began the new millennium, they had approximately 33,000 members in some 220 churches. Their church community probably represented another 15,000-20,000. Worldwide, there are about 225,000 Mennonite Brethren church members.

## Strong Spirit of Cooperation

What has characterized Mennonite Brethren church life has been a high level of cooperative work. In Canada, provincial conventions usually

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