

The Swiss Mennonite Heritage: Cheese-Makers and Wheat-Growers, or Peace-Builders and People of Courage

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TO THE 2005 ANNUAL MEETING OF THE SWISS MENNONITE CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

I'm speaking tonight because Arnold Wedel's family owns maple trees in upstate New York.

Nearly a year ago, there was a conversation among about 20 people gathered at the Bread Basket in Newton, Kansas to talk about ways to make SMCHA more relevant and attractive to more Mennonites of Swiss ancestry, especially to younger generations. When I was invited to participate by Arnold Wedel, I declined, feeling that I had little expertise to offer...having been raised on the fringes of the Swiss Mennonite community and having spent over 20 years living completely outside the community in Northern California before returning to my home community in rural Moundridge.

I suspect many of you know that Arnold rarely takes "no" for an answer. And in this case, I got a second phone call the night before the scheduled convocation, promising me a free gallon of his maple syrup if I would just come and listen...I didn't even have to talk. I still said no.

By the next morning, Mennonite guilt kicked in, and I figured that if Arnold was willing to give me a gallon of maple syrup just to show up, it must be important...so I rearranged my schedule and headed for Newton. While I remained mostly silent, I felt I owed Arnold at least some participation in exchange for the maple syrup, and near the end of the meeting I offered my perspective and left.

I thought the matter was finished, but earlier this year, I was approached by Jim Goering (who had also been at that Bread Basket gathering); he asked me to share and expand upon my comments for SMCHA's annual meeting. After initially declining, he and Arnold talked me into it over breakfast at--where else--the Bread Basket. You can understand why I now avoid both Arnold Wedel and the Bread Basket!

The problem discussed at the Bread Basket, which is the focus of my remarks is this: SMCHA was established to help preserve a sense of identity and peoplehood among those of Swiss Mennonite heritage, and thereby inspire and shape the future. Traditionally this has been done through emphasis on remembering and transmitting historical facts and details (genealogical histories, historical trips to old Europe, producing events in the Schweitzer dialect, sharing ethnic meals and recipes, tending the ancestral cemetery, re-creating old-time farming and living practices through various "living history" events, etc.). *However, not enough young people and young families attend SMCHA events, and even fewer are interested in membership in SMCHA.*

Why? What can be done to change this trend?

In considering the answers I offer, please understand that I would be disappointed indeed if my remarks did not spark questions, concerns, and even disagreement. There are many paths to SMCHA's future. What I offer for consideration is but one.

I have always enjoyed Swiss Mennonite folkways, customs, foods, and historical celebrations as much as anyone, and helped organize the 1999 celebration of the 125th anniversary of the coming of the Kotosufka village in Ukraine to the Moundridge area. Nonetheless, I suggest that simply continuing these types of activities without more will fail to generate new interest in and sustain SMCHA over the long haul. Why? Because the Swiss Mennonite folkways that we celebrate are relics of our past, worth preserving and important for self-understanding, but relics nonetheless. As relics, they have generally passed out of present usefulness and in some cases, even out of present understanding.

What do I mean by this claim?

P.R. Kaufman said in his 1931 monograph that Swiss-Mennonites were "sons of the Alps" who, when banished from their homeland, took the first opportunity to return "to their mountain!" (Whether all Swiss Anabaptists lived near or identified with mountains or not, I know that I have never longed to find some ancestral mountain home in Switzerland. In fact, the first time I went to the Rockies, I felt claustrophobic not being able to see to the far horizons that my homeland on the Kansas prairie allows.) Somewhere along the long march from Switzerland to America, the Swiss-Mennonite connection to Switzerland faded. Martin H. Schrag in his 1956 thesis (edited into book form in 1974 by Harley J. Stucky and published as *The European History of the Swiss Mennonites from Volhynia*), asserts that after about 100 years in the Palatinate, the Swiss Mennonites "gave up their Swiss dialect and many Swiss aspects of their culture, adopting the South German dialect, high German, and German culture."

After about 100 years in the Ukraine, many of the customs of the Palatinate were in turn lost, modified or blended with the folkways and foods of our Russian-Ukrainian neighbors. And now, a little over a hundred years after coming to the U.S., none can deny that our Volhynian customs have been almost completely wiped out by the pressures of American culture. *Which then is the "real" Swiss Mennonite culture for SMCHA to preserve?*

Swiss Mennonites originally came from the urban centers of the Swiss cantons, centers of learning and intellectual ferment. We don't know how they made their living, but we do know that as Anabaptists they were forbidden to practice most professions and many were driven into the high alpine meadows where they learned to survive as dairy farmers (and became expert cheese-makers). As our people migrated further into Eastern Europe where dairying was impractical, they changed livelihoods again, eventually becoming some of the world's finest grain farmers. And now, a mere 125 years since coming to the United States, only a tiny minority of Swiss Mennonites make their living solely as grain farmers; far more work in education, health care, business, technology, and community development work. *Which then is the "real" Swiss Mennonite livelihood for SMCHA to celebrate?*

Although I am a "pure-bred" Swiss Mennonite, I can't speak or understand the Schweitzer

dialect, I can't make cheese, sun bonnets, or poppy-seed rolls (though I can flip a mean potato pancake and make passable kraut berrogi), and I know that I, along with many other younger Swiss Mennonites, never will learn these and other traditional folkways. They will eventually fade from everyday use just as we long ago lost our love for Swiss mountains, exchanged dairy for grain farming, gave up Ukrainian village life for isolated homesteads in Kansas, stopped having services in German, quit wearing head coverings, and so on.

Given such dramatic cultural changes over our long history, grounding SMCHA survival on preservation of folkways and language may do nothing more than "freeze" a very specific moment in Swiss Mennonite history, i.e., the years in Ukraine. Don Lago, in his 2004 book *On the Viking Trail: Travels in Scandinavian America*, notes that this is precisely what has happened in Lindsborg, Kansas which is now more "Swedish" than Sweden. While it is a "cute" living museum of Swedish culture as it existed at the height of Swedish migration to the U.S., it is largely irrelevant to how modern Swedes or Swedish-Americans live their daily lives.

One might argue that since identity for any indigenous people comes from language and culture, to sustain the people (identity), language and culture must be preserved (like the revival of Hebrew at the beginning of the 20th Century to the official language of the state of Israel, or the recent drive to revive Native American languages in order to preserve tribal cultural identity). Under this theory, preservation of Swiss Mennonite language and culture (Schweitzer dialect, Schweitzer foods and folkways) would be key to preserving Swiss Mennonite identity. If this is true, why then isn't it working? Why aren't younger people of Swiss Mennonite heritage more interested in SMCHA efforts to preserve Swiss-Mennonite language, culture, and folkways?

I suggest that this approach hasn't worked because the Swiss Mennonites as an identifiable group have never been an "indigenous" people. Their original identity as a separate people came not from language or a culture. Instead, the core of Swiss Mennonite identity was grounded in a set of values. If a Swiss Mennonite (or Mennonite) identity is to be successfully passed on to future generations, it is imperative that we find ways to celebrate and nourish the core values which sustained our ancestors. It was those deeply-held values that were very different (even radically different) than those of their neighbors, not the food they ate or the language they spoke (which were no different than their neighbors), or the livelihood they chose (which was determined largely by where they lived).

I am not talking here about the history of Swiss Mennonites as a people, which would certainly include our history as cheese-makers and farmers, as well as our history of persecution, our historical dialects, ethnic foods, and so on. Rather, I am talking about the Swiss Mennonite heritage which, according to Merriam Webster's dictionary, refers to a legacy that has been transmitted by or acquired from our predecessors... our birthright. The example used in the dictionary is: "The nation's heritage of tolerance."

My point is that our Swiss-Mennonite heritage/birthright/legacy is not cheese-making or farming or Schweitzer-Deutsch. These are not what has (or will) ultimately be passed on from generation to generation. Rather our unique birthright as Mennonites (what can be carried with us wherever we go and whatever we do in life) is a set of values. While these values surely include adult baptism, separation of church and state, simplicity of life-style and stewardship of creation,

respect for community, and an emphasis on the primacy of “works” over words as the measure of faith and a life well-lived...the value I wish to focus on tonight is this: the Swiss Mennonite deep and abiding commitment to peace and nonviolence. How does that value play itself out in the 21st Century? What might SMCHA consider doing to preserve and transmit that value into the future?

For the past three years I have had the privilege of working at the London Mennonite Centre, working with their ecumenical Bridge Builders project, training church laity and leadership in mediation and conflict resolution. Trainees have come from all over the British Commonwealth and have included such high officials as the Archbishop of Canterbury! Non-Mennonites at these trainings have expressed great envy that I come from a people with such a long tradition of peacemaking. They figure we must all be masters at managing conflict and they look to us for strong leadership on a path that is new to them and often very discouraging! They are a little crestfallen when I report that we North American Mennonites struggle as much as the next person with how to manage our conflicts constructively, and that too often we find it hard even to admit that we have conflict!

Still, these encounters with non-Mennonites highlight an important point that others may see more clearly than we ourselves: Mennonites carry as their birthright, whether they choose to embrace it or not, the path of peacemaker.

C. Henry Smith contended as early as 1938 that pacifism was the “distinguishing” Mennonite characteristic and “perhaps the only excuse for the separate existence of the denomination.” Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill, editors of the 1994 book *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism*, claim that nonresistance is rooted deeply in the Mennonite soul, and that “nonresistance” as “symbolic code word for the pursuit of peace, nourished Mennonite self-understanding and defined the Mennonite version” of the Gospel over the centuries. According to Jim Juhnke in his book *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America*, military service long ago replaced baptism as the flash point in American Mennonite church-state conflicts and, according to Driedger and Kraybill, has “defined them as a conspicuous socio-religious minority” including identification at least since the 1930s as “an historic peace church.”

What has happened to this peacemaker tradition as Mennonites have moved out of their sectarian communities into the American cultural mainstream, as we have surely done since World War II?

Driedger and Kraybill assert that peace convictions are fragile. “Stubbornly held by one generation, even to the point of death, they can quickly shatter with the winds of nationalism and social success in the next.” Dutch Mennonites abandoned nonresistance by the end of the 18th century, and German Mennonites abandoned it shortly thereafter in the 19th century as they gained social respectability and higher social status. In Switzerland, Russia and France, nonresistance waned among Mennonites who did not migrate to North America as their communities became more commercialized and urbanized. Most ominous is the experience of the Church of the Brethren, which up through the 19th century as a group shared similar convictions of nonresistance with Mennonites. However, only 10% of Brethren young men opted for conscientious objection in World War II and a 1987 survey suggests that only one third of all Brethren would today identify themselves as pacifists.

So how do North American Mennonites fare in maintaining their peace-making values at the beginning of the 21st Century?

Perhaps the first place to look is in the [1995 Mennonite Confession of Faith](#). Article 22, titled “Peace, Justice and Nonresistance,” states in part:

Led by the Holy Spirit, we follow Christ in the way of peace, doing justice, bringing reconciliation, and practicing nonresistance even in the face of violence and warfare... As followers of Jesus, we participate in his ministry of peace and justice. He has called us to find our blessing in making peace and seeking justice.

The Commentary to Article 22, explains this “blessing”:

1. The biblical concept of peace embraces personal peace with God, peace in human relations, peace among nations, and peace with God’s creation. The Old Testament word for peace (shalom) includes healing, reconciliation, and well-being. Peace is more than the absence of war; it includes the restoration of right relationship.

...

3. In continuity with previous Mennonite confessions of faith, we affirm that nonparticipation in warfare involves conscientious objection to military service and a nonresistant response to violence. Our peace witness also includes peacemaking and working for justice. Peace witness is needed even when the nations in which we live are not at war. Ministries of mediation, conciliation, and nonviolent resolution of everyday conflict can express our commitment to Christ’s way of peace. (emphasis added.)

Driedger and Kraybill have documented the restructuring over the past 50 years of the Mennonite peace position from one of nonresistance (die stille im land) to one of positive peacemaking set forth in Article 22 of the current Mennonite Confession of Faith. They looked at all Mennonite denominations (MC, GC, MB, BIC, and EMC) and identified the most important factors affecting the retention of strong peacemaking values. These included:

- Openly embracing Anabaptist principles;
- Belonging to either to an MC or GC congregation;
- Identifying with a Mennonite community;
- Attending a Mennonite College; and
- Attaining a college or graduate degree.

Stalwart Anabaptists are 6 times more likely than lax ones to score high in supporting nonresistance, according to Driedger and Kraybill’s study. Though not considered a “determining factor,” the study also notes that individuals from Swiss Mennonite backgrounds were twice as likely to support nonresistance as those from a Dutch-Russian tradition.

Driedger and Kraybill also reviewed the transition to active peacemaking that took place among American Mennonites during the 1970’s and 1980’s through a variety of peacemaking initiatives. I want to highlight a few of those here.

First, was the development by Mennonites of Victim-Offender Reconciliation Projects in the 1970s and 1980s, which has led to a complete re-thinking of the criminal justice system throughout the country: from one based upon punishment and retribution, to one based upon restoring right relationships, personal accountability, and community participation. Mediation between offenders and victims was once considered crazy; now many states fund such mediation programs as integral parts of their criminal justice systems. Recognition of the primacy of Mennonite work in this area came in the late 1990's when federal prosecutors on the Tim McVeigh Oklahoma City Bombing case retained Howard Zehr and Tammy Krause (from Eastern Mennonite University's Conflict Transformation Program) to teach them how to work with victims who were being asked to testify at trial.

Next came the idea of a [Mennonite Conciliation Service](#) (MCS), which first surfaced in 1975 at a workshop on conflict resolution at Bethel College, and which Bill Keeney, Ron Kraybill and others nurtured into one of the pioneering institutions of the new movement of conflict management which continues to sweep the nation and the world. With a mission of training Mennonite peacemakers in conciliation, mediation and the facilitation of conflict resolution, MCS (now subsumed within the MCC Office of Peacebuilding) continues to bring together talented individuals who have contributed enormously to local, national and international peacebuilding efforts.

In fact, MCS-trained mediators and conciliators, led by John Paul Lederach, Ron Kraybill and others are known throughout the world for their humility, sensitivity to community, respect for other cultures, and willingness to listen and learn in difficult conflict situations (rather than simply impose a solution, as is too often the case for western relief and development agencies). From the Ground Up: Mennonite Contributions to International Peacebuilding (edited by Cynthia Sampson and John Paul Lederach), is an excellent recounting of this experience.

MCS-trained mediators and peacebuilders have worked in South Africa, Northern Ireland, Central America, Columbia, Somalia, Somaliland, and Liberia, just to name a few countries. John Paul Lederach helped broker a peace accord between the Nicaraguan Sandanistas and the indigenous Mesquite Indians, even as a contract was put out on his head by CIA operatives and a plot to kidnap his young daughter was foiled. Ron Kraybill was in on the ground floor of the National Peace Accords in South Africa.

In addition to field work, many groundbreaking texts on conflict transformation and peacebuilding have been authored by MCS-trained writers and practitioners. The MCS Mediation and Facilitation Training Manual is considered by many as a "Bible" for those training and working in the field of conflict management.

[The Kansas Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution \(KIPCOR\)](#), established at Bethel College, North Newton (KS) in 1985, was one of the first regional peace institutes in the country dedicated to both the study and practice of conflict resolution.

Today, [KIPCOR](#) is involved in a number of conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives:

- Providing extensive training opportunities for individuals and groups in conflict management and consensus decision-making, including a recent special initiative funded

by the Governor's Sub-Cabinet on Natural Resources to train Kansas water and natural resource agency personnel;

- Mediating individual and family conflicts through its Community Mediation Center;
- Providing consulting and intervention for churches, government agencies and other organizations throughout the Central States that seek assistance in problem-solving, conflict management, and reconciliation work;
- Initiating an Elder Care project to facilitate decision-making between elders and their adult children;
- Training peer mediators in schools and colleges around the state;
- Facilitating special trust-building Time of Discovery sessions between Catholic and Protestant youth from Northern Ireland who come to Hutchinson (KS) each summer through the Ulster Project;
- Initiating an interdenominational Church Conflict Working Group to train church laity and leaders in effective congregational decision-making and models for dealing with difference and disagreement;
- Administering The River Group, a consortium of professionals experienced in managing environmental conflict and the facilitation of public policy for the multi-state Missouri River Basin area, including representatives of private, state, federal and tribal lands;
- Offering, in conjunction with Bethel College, a Professional Certificate in Conflict Management Studies; and
- Administering the 30-year-old Peace Lecture Series, which has provided a forum for many distinguished scholars, artists, activists and visionaries, including such luminaries as Dorothy Day, Pete Seeger, David Brower, Edward Teller, Roger Fisher, Walter Wink, James M. Lawson, Jr. and Nobel Laureates Adolpho Perez Esquivel and Mairead Corrigan.

In 1986, [Christian Peacemaker Teams](#) was established to develop a nonviolent peacemaking force that can intervene in situations of international violence and hostility. CPT teams have since intervened in Israel, the West Bank of Palestine, Jordan, Montreal, Quebec, Haiti, Columbia, Arizona, Los Angeles, and Iraq, among other places.

Following on the heels of [KIPCOR](#)'s founding, peace institutes and centers were established at nearly every other Mennonite-related denominational college, including:

- The [Lion and Lamb Peace Arts Center](#), founded at Bluffton College in 1987; home to 5,500 volumes on children's literature on peace and peace-related topics, 1,000 references and curriculum guides on peace studies and conflict resolution, and an extensive peace-related art gallery, including the Peace Sculpture Garden funded by a generous grant from the Honda Foundation.
- The [Center for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies](#) at Fresno Pacific University, which specializes in developing and implementing restorative justice principles for public school disciplinary procedures, and which has created conflict management systems for refugees and refugee settlement workers at 12 sites across the U.S. under a grant from the Department of Housing and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement.
- [Plowshares Project](#), including the Indianapolis Peace House; a peace studies collaborative project among Goshen (Mennonite), Earlham (Quaker), and Manchester (Church of the

Brethren) Colleges and funded by the Lilly Endowment, which provides peacemaking internships in an urban environment plus core skills for non-violent social change.

- The [Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies](#) at Conrad Grebel College, which receives funding from the Canadian government to administer Conflict Resolution Network Canada, a national network for community justice and conflict resolution programs throughout Canada.
- The [Center for Justice and Peacebuilding](#) at Eastern Mennonite University, was founded by original members of MCS in 1994 (formerly called the Conflict Transformation Program), including the highly acclaimed [Summer Peacebuilding Institute](#) (SPI), that offers specialized, intensive training in peacebuilding, conflict transformation, trauma healing, and restorative justice to practitioners (both Mennonite and non-Mennonite) from all over the world (over 50 countries were represented in the 2005 SPI alone).

That's a lot of activity in a short time for people who traditionally have stayed quiet in the land! And now you understand why those Londoners were so envious of my being part of the Mennonite tradition!

So, what does all this suggest for SMCHA and its desire to nourish and transmit a unique Mennonite heritage?

First, make certain our children know what courage runs through their veins! Teach our core Anabaptist values through the stories of our ancestors. The drama of our past, well-presented, is hard to resist...even for the MTV generation!

For example, in 2001, I was part of the committee charged with updating and expanding the Genealogical record for the Josua and Freni Stucky Zerger family. Part of my work on that project was to prepare a narrative of the Zerger family from its origins in Switzerland to its settlement in the U.S.A. While I have always been aware of the Martyrs Mirror, I had never felt it connected closely with my own family. However, in the course of researching Zerger family history, I discovered our roots in Bern, Switzerland, and learned for the first time that my ancestral family as well as those of most Swiss Mennonites likely had members who were whipped, branded, banished, imprisoned pillared, stretched on the rack, sold as slaves for Venetian galleys, drowned, or executed...all for the sake of Anabaptist values. The forced baptism of Anabaptist children administered with the help of police continued until 1812!

I also learned for the first time that my oldest known ancestor, Johannes Zercher, moved his family at least 6 times between 1786 and 1817, trekking thousands of miles from the Palatinate to Eduardsdorf, Volhynia...all to avoid persecution, economic hardship, and to honor his deepest spiritual beliefs. Six times in 30 years! That's a lot of moving around for principles! As I was writing, I often asked myself whether I would have the courage to make so many moves based upon conscience, especially were they as difficult as moving in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries surely was. While I was much inspired by Johannes' story, I was also humbled because I wasn't sure what I would do...and I was troubled that I hadn't known the incredible story of this ancestor until I was in my early fifties! Not knowing, I had not passed these stories on to my children. What had that cost them as they developed their individual identities?

Dr. Lee Palmer Wandel, who delivered the 2004 Menno Simmons Lectures at Bethel College,

remarked: “The story of Christ gave Anabaptists, Mennonites, and Hutterites fearlessness... Each [martyr]’s faith changed the course of history in ways we are just beginning to chart, and to understand.” She challenged students at Mennonite institutions to be passionate about their history because “they come from a tradition of great courage.” I challenge SMCHA to make transmission of this “tradition of great courage” part of its gift to future generations. Tell our stories and teach our values in Sunday Schools and Youth Groups, and on the SMCHA web site. Preserve and share the history of our contemporary peacemakers through projects like *The Eden Peace Witness: A Collection of Personal Accounts* (Jeffery Koller, Ed.), which offers first-person accounts of CPS experiences. Sponsor peace essay scholarships that encourage college-bound youth to think and write about the Mennonite peace tradition.

Second, learn peace-making and conflict resolution skills. Use them in your families, at work, in your church life. Training is regularly available at [KIPCOR](#) so you don’t have to go far to learn basic, and sometimes life-changing, skills.

Third, make it your mission to lobby for and sponsor speakers, training, and the use of peace-building skills in local churches and schools, church camps and bible schools, church colleges and seminaries.

Fourth, provide direct financial support for local Mennonite peacebuilding initiatives, such as [KIPCOR](#) or Offender Victim Ministries. Grants and donations are down dramatically since the September 11 attacks, even as program demands have grown exponentially. While Mennonite Colleges and Universities provide valuable physical and academic resources for Mennonite peace institutes and centers on their campuses, operating expenses are largely funded through individual donations, grants, and fee-for-service projects.

Fifth, encourage student attendance at Mennonite Colleges and Universities, and protect the teaching of Anabaptist history and peacemaking skills at those same colleges and universities.

Just as the Amish are known as the Plain People for their preservation of community and traditional ways, SMCHA can help create a future where our children and Mennonites in general are known as the Peacemakers: those people in every community, at every school, in every business or endeavor to whom others turn for help in engaging conflict constructively and building peace with justice. This is our heritage, the legacy we have been blessed to share with our children and the world. With help from groups like SMCHA, we can do what Jim Wallis of Sojourners urged upon us in his 2005 Peace Lecture at Bethel College: become “not just peace-loving but peace-making people.”