

STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL MENNONITE CHURCH

Making way for new visions

IN JUNE 1919, a group of nearly 30 young Mennonite service workers gathered in Clarmont-en-Argonne, France, to discuss the future of the church. They had come to the region only a few months earlier, part of a small contingent of Mennonite conscientious objectors to World War I who had joined the American Friends Service Committee, eager to participate in a postwar mission of relief and reconstruction.

At the gathering, the men shared their disappointment in the leadership of the Mennonite Church back home. As pacifists conscripted into military training camps, they had received little support or direction from church leaders, who seemed to be preoccupied with doctrinal concerns and enforcing conformity on a host of cultural distinctives. The men were also disappointed that the church had shown little interest in their work in France or the larger social and political transformations brought about by the war.

Their meeting aroused great concern among the Mennonite hierarchy at home. Daniel Kauffman, redoubtable editor of the *Gospel Herald*, took offense at the gathering, arguing that “the apostolic church had no ‘young men’s meetings’” and that no church conference had approved the meeting. J.C. Meyer, one of the group’s leaders, responded: “If it is heresy for a young person to express his views, it is no less heretical and infinitely more hypocritical for him to hold the views and never express them.”

Meyer and the others yearned for a church that was more outward looking—more actively engaged in missions, relief and service work, and higher education. Above all, they wanted to have a space for open conversations about church organization, engagement in politics and their Christian vocations.

What would a healthy generational transition look like?

The frustration expressed by the young men at Clarmont-en-Argonne—and in three subsequent Young People’s Conferences—points to the ancient challenge in every human society of generational transition. How does an older, entrenched group of leaders pass along authority, resources and opportunity to the oncoming generation of young people who are eager to exercise their gifts? Clearly, in the 1920s, a generation of young Mennonites was hungry for leadership opportunities.

In 1927, Harold S. Bender, then a young professor at Goshen (Ind.) College, created a journal he hoped would create a space for vigorous discussion about the church’s identity and its future. In the opening editorial to *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Bender issued this clarion call: “Youth of the Mennonite Church, the church of tomorrow! The heritage is yours, the organization

is yours, the talent is yours, the problems are yours, the future is yours. Get the vision, follow the gleam, bend your back to the burden and consecrate yourselves to the task. You are needed, you are wanted, you are able.”

As Anna Showalter has noted in a 2011 article on the Young People’s Conferences, published in the same journal Bender founded, within a few decades of their meeting at Clarmont-en-Argonne, virtually all the reforms that the young people were advocating in the early 1920s were realized.

Today, the average age of members in Mennonite Church USA—like its counterparts in Canada and Europe—is approaching 60. In the meantime, our sister churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America are significantly younger. For those of us in the older generation, what would a healthy generational transition look like, both within our own church but also as we look to the youthful vitality of the global Anabaptist-Mennonite family? What structures, habits, traditions and forms might we need to relinquish in order to make way for new visions? Can we say with Harold Bender to the younger churches elsewhere in the world: “You are needed, you are wanted, you are able”?



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