

What Holds Brethren Together

Brethren Press Dinner

Annual Conference St. Louis

July 8, 2012

Frank Ramirez says there have been only two major splits in the Church of the Brethren: the two-fold separation in 1881-83 and the Dunkard Brethren departure in 1926. Some individuals have left along the way, including Conrad Beissel in 1728 and the individuals who followed him, and a few congregations have withdrawn here and there across the years. The main body of the Church of the Brethren has divided only two times during our 304 year history. Something holds Brethren together.

Some fear that the current conflict over homosexuality may tear the church apart. A Hispanic minister, asked, “Do you think that the COB is going to split?” I said, “No. I think we Brethren can work our way through the current controversy. We probably will not reach agreement about homosexuality in this decade, but we may gain better perspective so that this one emotional issue no longer looms so large that it drives us apart.”

I meant to say more, but when I paused for a breath, the driver of our car spoke up. To my surprise he said, “Maybe I’m too pessimistic. I think the church might split.” This level-headed, perceptive, conservative minister began to tell the other two of us about several strong congregations where trouble is brewing. Then he and the Hispanic minister began to talk about several districts that were in midst of taking official action urging AC officers and committees to rescind a decision they had made pertaining to this conference in St. Louis.

After that conversation, I read Harold Martin’s article entitled “An Apostate Church – Stay in or leave?” (March/April Brethren Revival Fellowship newsletter.) More about that article later because Brother Harold came out on the side of “stay in.”

Conservatives are not alone in considering separation. Charles Boyer, a former AC moderator, pastor, and national staff leader, described the acceptance and affirmation of gays and lesbians in his congregation in Laverne California. Then Chuck proposed that Brethren consider “creating two denominations and encouraging both to love each other as we go our separate ways.” Brother Chuck died the same month his article was published, September, 2010, but his message in Messenger is widely remembered.

One or two leading members of the Beacon Heights congregation in Fort Wayne, Indiana—the congregation that originated the query pertaining to same-sex covenantal relationships—have drifted away (for the time being at least), disappointed by the action Annual Conference took last summer and disturbed by an anonymous death threat against one of their members. Pledges to the BH unified budget dropped from \$361,000 in 2011 to \$261,000 for 2012, a \$100,000 reduction from one year to the next. The congregation downsized its pastoral staff.

The last year has been tough for progressives and conservatives. Some have wondered whether the Church of the Brethren will remain intact. It is in this atmosphere, that we consider the question, “What Holds Brethren Together?”

TRIBALISM

Tribalism is one force that, like gravity, keeps Brethren from flying apart. Disparaging words have been spoken about tribes; let me say a positive word based on the biblical perspective. The Hebrew people belonged to tribes. Even in the New Testament, Jesus was of the tribe of Judah. Paul was “a Hebrew of the tribe of Benjamin.” We are Christians of a tribe named Brethren.

The tribe to which I belong has become a basic part of who I am. I support my tribe with continuing loyalty—not blind loyalty but steadfast loyalty—to the highest and best within the tribe. That tribe gives me an identity and serves as a source of my deepest convictions.

Scattering forces in the 20th and 21st centuries weaken tribes: *mobility, individualism, anti-institutionalism, and globalization*. Despite these challenges, tribes have remained. *Newsweek* magazine as recently as April 9, this year, declared “everyone, no exception, must have a tribe,.. And so it has ever been.” The writer of that article entitled “What’s Your Tribe?” traced the formation of tribes in ancient history, described their function, and then analyzed how evolution has built tribalism into the makeup of the human species. The article concludes: “Individual selection tends to favor selfish behavior. Group selection favors altruistic behavior and is responsible for the origin of the most advanced level of social behavior, that attained by ants, bees, termites—and humans.” We human beings, like termites, have a built-in inclination to become part of something bigger than ourselves individually.

Tribalism is not a sufficient reason to stay Brethren. Tribes can become ingrown, dated, apostate. The early German-speaking Brethren preferred a different word *Gemeinschaft*. Michael Frantz of the Conestoga congregation in a document written in 1747 at the request of Germantown extolled *Gemeinschaft*. When Don Durnbaugh published Frantz’s statement, he translated *gemeinschaft*, not as “community” (a common translation), but as “communion,” connoting a deeper unity of spirit among brothers and sisters in Christ. (*The Brethren in Colonial*, pp. 447-459.) Brethren value *gemeinshaft*.

Do not dismiss tribes as a thing of the past. Brethren, even today, are not just *individuals*. We, by God’s grace, are a *people*. Linda said yesterday at the Philadelphia airport, “There go two Brethren on their way to Annual Conference.” I asked, “How do you know?” She said, “They look like Brethren, a ‘salt of the earth’ people.” We belong to a *communion*. We are a tribe. This collective identity draws us together.

Leadership

A corollary to tribe is leadership. Brethren call leaders who embody basic Brethren values: humility, honesty, reconciliation, and deep devotion to Jesus Christ. Such leaders enable Brethren to work out differences and to preserve love for one another. That has been true across the centuries, going back to colonial America.

Alexander Mack, Jr., or Sander Mack as he was commonly known, is said to have been the greatest leader among the Brethren in Colonial America. The Brethren historians who gathered at the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies a month ago to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the birth of Sander Mack called Mack a reconciler. After scrutinizing his writings: his letters, historical notes, and diary; his poems, hymns, and devotional thoughts; his manuscript of a written debate with a prominent Lutheran theologian, these scholars described Sander Mack as a forthright leader who was gracious and gentle in spirit. Two examples.

When Catherine Hummer's visions and heavenly visitations excited some Brethren but disquieted others, Mack became the mediator judging by Catherine's correspondence with him. (Brethren in Colonial America, p. 263-266.) Apparently influenced by Mack, the Annual Meeting cautioned Catherine's father against excesses, but did not pronounce judgment on the merits of Catherine's visions leaving room for individual opinions rather than pushing the issue to the point of division. Peace prevailed. Sander Mack's name appears among the signatures to that Annual Meeting decision in 1763.

When the timing of footwashing at Love Feast became a matter of great contention—whether the footwashing should be done before the meal or after the meal—Mack made every effort to harmonize the Gospel accounts to find the correct order. He wanted Brethren to do it right but rather than impose his understanding of the Gospels, Mack relied upon patient, gentle persuasion. He wrote, "Oh, how Satan could mock us if we were to quarrel about the time when the feet should be washed and love would be destroyed. Therefore, dear brethren, let us watch and be careful, and above all preserve love, for thus one preserves light."

Sander Mack lived to be 91 years old. Historians agree that he shaped the soul of the church in the last half of the 18th century. He modeled a style of leadership that preserved unity, not just during his long life, but in the centuries that have followed him.

I would love to talk more about Sander Mack. I really enjoyed that conference at the Young Center last month. But "time fails me," as the writer of Hebrews put it in his "heroes of faith" chapter.

Enough about a great leader in the past. What about now? Where is our Sander Mack when we need him in the 21st century?

Let me speak an encouraging word. When dispirited Brethren told Raymond Peters who had become an elder statesman in the church, "We don't have great leaders in the church anymore," he replied, "In difficult times, people often think their leaders are inadequate. We have great leaders in the church now. You just don't recognize them." I heard those words a generation ago; I remember them to this day.

When I was young pastor, we had Dan West but he was too idealistic, M.R. Ziegler but he was a maverick, Harold Row but he was a bureaucrat. Abraham Lincoln was called a baboon because of his long arms and his reelection to a second term was in serious doubt almost until the day the votes were counted. No leader is a perfect specimen.

Certainly not Abraham the laughter, Jacob the swindler, Moses the murderer, and David the adulterer. Certainly not Jefferson and Hamilton who fought like cats and dogs. God has used fallible men and women to lead his people forward.

That is true today. Harold Martin, a key leader within the BRF since its founding in 1959, in an article already cited, states outright that the COB has become an apostate church. He lists eight grievances that tear at his heart. So does Brother Martin urge his conservative friends and colleagues to abandon the apostate church? No, he counsels them to remain steadfast. Both he and Craig Alan Myers, current president of BRF, remind the readers of that March/April newsletter that there is "no absolutely pure church" and "those who feel they are going to find a paradise in another denomination will be in for a real surprise." Martin warns: "One thing we should not do is to start multiple independent congregations that tend to become in-grown and dominated by one or two

strong personalities who tend to ‘run things’ their own way.” Brother Martin and Brother Myers advocate revival within, not separation from, the Brethren. That is leadership in 2012.

Stan Noffsinger and Mary Jo Flory-Steury called a leadership summit last spring near the peak of the conflict. Most of the 31 participants came knowing which side they were on but left with a deeper understanding of one another and a better rapport with one another. Calling that meeting was a creative, well-timed plan. That is leadership at a critical time.

Several months I disagreed with a leading Brethren, whom I have known for a lifetime, about an action related to a gay church leader. He became agitated and tried to set me straight. Our conversation broke off because our meeting had ended and people were heading home. I ran into him a month later at another event. I asked him, “Are we still friends?” He smiled and said, “We are still friends.”

Who can say for sure whether or not the Brethren will split in this generation? Sometimes divisive leaders pop up. Conrad Beissel belonged to the Brethren only four years but created havoc. 150 years later Henry Holsinger came along. His grandmother was the granddaughter of Sander Mack yet unlike his ancestor Holsinger was abrasive and condescending. Don Durnbaugh said that the split in 1881-1883 had more to do with Holsinger’s personality than with issues. Within a generation the main body of the COB had become more progressive than the Progressive Brethren who broke off. If only Henry Holsinger had inherited his great, great grandfather’s patience and humility.

Choose your leaders carefully. Some leaders foment discord, demonizing their opponents. Other leaders foster unity, appealing to our nobler instincts. Overall and to a remarkable degree, Brethren have called leaders who, like Sander Mack, express strong convictions with grace and humility. Michael Wolfe Jr. from the western Brethren, John Kline from Virginia, James Quinter from Pennsylvania, Anna Mow who got around so much she seemed to be from almost everywhere, and many other wise, capable, forward-looking men and women helped lead the church forward even in times of dissension.

No force in religion

Now let us turn from the *dynamics* of tribe, communion and leadership, to several *principles* that hold Brethren together. *No force in religion* gives Brethren room to disagree strongly and yet remain in love and fellowship with one another.

To be accurate historically, we must acknowledge that COB has a checkered history in its practice of *no force*. Sander Mack’s daughter Sarah was excluded from the “kiss of love” and communion because she married someone outside the brotherhood. (*Brethren in Colonial America*, p. 239.) A century later Brethren became preoccupied with hairstyles, beards and bonnets. Obedience and church discipline took precedence over freedom of conscience.

It was not until the end of the 19th century, 1899 to be exact, that Martin Grove Brumbaugh in his *History of the Brethren* elevated the maxim “No exercise of force in religion,” and expanded it to mean not only freedom from government oppression, but also freedom within the church. (*History of the Brethren*, 1899 edition, pp. 3-5.) He wrote that our church is false to its history when it oppresses any human soul and false to its vital spirit of Christian toleration when it persecutes any human soul. (*Brethren Society* by Carl F. Bowman, p. 253).

Brethren resonated to Brumbaugh’s insight. They began to proclaim “no force in religion” as Brethren principle. A *Resolution Urging Forbearance* adopted by Annual Conference during the

300th anniversary year states, “For at least a hundred years we have recognized that being open to the Holy Spirit sometimes requires us to accept differences in the body of Christ and to practice forbearance with one another.”

Harold Martin pointed to another dimension of *no force*, the freedom of congregations. He noted: “...there is great freedom at the local level for the congregation to be as biblical as it wants, without fear of interference from denominational leaders....” He described this freedom of congregations as one of the benefits of continuing within the COB. A great variety of Brethren agree. They thrive in their local church so long as their congregation is free to be as biblical as it wants to be.

Emery DeWitt, a relatively new Brethren, wrote. “...when Brethren come together remembering our historic commitment to *no force*, we can engage each other and learn from each other in an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance.” (*A Dunker Guide to Brethren Beliefs*, p. 62.) No force in religion holds Brethren, new and old, together.

No Creed but the NT

Closely associated with *no force* is the principle *no creed but the New Testament*. The NT, as understood by Brethren, portrays a way of life. All denominations gravitate toward favorite biblical passages that shape their communion. Brethren turn to the Gospels most frequently, to the stories about Jesus: his lessons in the Sermon on the Mount about humility, honesty, reconciliation, and simplicity; his portrayal of simple deeds of compassion in Matthew 25 and the parable of the Good Samaritan; his own life: healing the sick, washing the feet of his disciples, suffering on the cross. The Brethren orthodoxy centers on practice, not doctrine.

Let’s be clear, turning to the NT will not eliminate discord. I’ve heard conservatives say about homosexuality, “The Bible is clear. All we need to do is turn to the Bible.” Paradoxically, I’ve heard progressives say, “We need to learn biblical scholarship, including how the Bible came into being and how to understand texts in light of context and cultural differences.” Both of these endeavors are important, but Brethren don’t you know that the Bible, our supreme authority, has to be interpreted by fallible human beings? A conservative friend told me, “Some conservatives believe that the most disastrous statement ever to come out of Annual Conference was the 1979 paper on *Biblical Inspiration and Authority*.” He said “We conservatives should never have agreed to two columns. Those columns are back of our differences today over homosexuality.” Interpretations vary and that is where the rub comes in.

I don’t think that the Bible will change the minds of most Brethren about homosexuality. I think culture and experience will, because our daily experiences influence our understanding of the Bible.

Let me illustrate. Baptists in the South favored slavery, quoting verses from Genesis, Leviticus, and the writings of Paul (the same books of the Bible cited today in the conversations about homosexuality). They supported slavery so adamantly the church split into Southern Baptists and Northern Baptists in 1845. Sixteen years later Southern Baptists defended slavery so vehemently they went to war to fight for it.

One hundred and fifty years later Southern Baptists apologized officially for their past support of slavery. What changed their minds about slavery? The Bible did not change? Those verses in Genesis, Leviticus, and the writings of Paul are still there. Southern Baptists believe that Bible is

inerrant. What changed? Culture changed. Experience changed. The Spirit of God works in unexpected and mysterious ways.

Peter went to the house of Cornelius, although Jews were not supposed to visit Gentiles, after his vision of the white sheet (Acts 10). He even ordered the Gentiles there to be baptized. When he returned to Jerusalem, circumcised believers criticized him. Peter told them about what he had *experienced*, about the white sheet and the Holy Spirit descending upon the Gentiles. He said, his face aglow, “When the Holy Spirit fell upon them...who was I to hinder God?” When the circumcised believers heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God,.. (Acts 11:17-18).

Like Peter, we discover that the Holy Spirit descends in unexpected places and brings new light as we search the scripture together. This sense that our creed, the NT, has a dynamic quality is expressed in the principle “No Creed but the NT.” This principle, this way of life, holds Brethren together.

Service

Finally, *service* in Christ’s name draws Brethren together. Volunteers from Lancaster congregation (considered a liberal congregation in Atlantic Northeast District) joined volunteers from White Oak (not considered a liberal congregation) at an out-of-state disaster relief project. Those volunteers came back home talking about how much they enjoyed working together. The Lancaster Brethren tend to be hard workers. The White Oak Brethren tend to be good cooks. That is a great combination. (The White Oak volunteers were skilled workers also.) Mutual efforts to serve bring Brethren together in body and in spirit.

The big Disaster Relief Auction sponsored jointly by ANE and S PA districts is a great occasion where Brethren of all stripes mingle. When Brethren join hands to serve others in the name of Christ they draw closer to one another and to Christ. The basin and towel symbolize this unifying service.

A tug-of-war goes on between scattering forces and unifying forces. It is not clear which side will prevail. The whole country, not just the church, is polarized now.

Brethren Press/Messenger did not ask me to speculate about whether Brethren will stay together? They did not ask me to evaluate whether the Brethren should stay together. They invited me to address what holds Brethren together. I have identified five unifying forces. We belong to a tribe, more deeply to a communion. The character of our leadership is reconciling. *No force in religion* gives us room for unity without requiring uniformity. *No creed but the NT* has about it a dynamic quality that encourages us to keep growing in our understanding of Christ’s saving grace and his way of life. *Serving* others in Christ’s name brings us together and establishes a bond among us.

You, no doubt, could add to this list of positive influences. Blest be the ties that bind our hearts in Christian love.