

Who are the
Mennonites?



Menno Lite:

A brief history for the young at heart

I. Universal Church

Beginnings

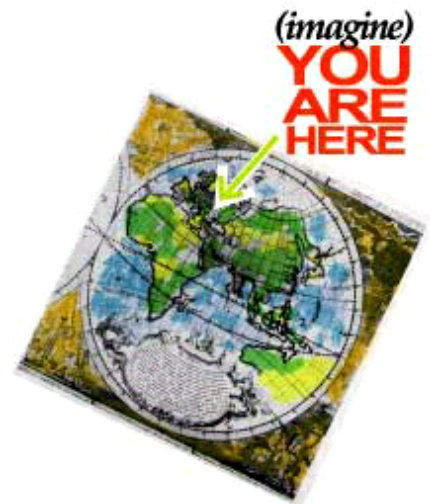
Let's pretend that you are living in a small Central European village in the year 1515—almost 500 years ago. (America had been discovered only 23 years earlier.) It is a beautiful Sunday morning, and the meadows are radiant with all the rainbow colors of a million flowers of a hundred different kinds.

Now, let's pretend that on this beautiful morning, you and your parents, brothers and sisters are on your way to the village church. There is only one church in your village, and all the people go to the same church. They have to. There is a law in this land that says that every child who is born must be brought to the village church and be baptized, and his parents must begin paying church taxes for him just as surely and regularly as taxes are paid to the king.

Babies baptized

In almost every country in Europe, every baby became a member of the church in the same way he became a subject of the ruler of the country. If you had lived there in 1515, you, too, would have been a member of the Catholic (which means Universal) church. Your parents, whether they liked it or not, would have been required to bring you to the church as a baby to be baptized, and to pay taxes asked for by the church.

Let's go into the church and see what kind of a place it is. The front of the inside is dominated by an altar over which is a statue of Jesus hanging on the cross. This statute is called a crucifix. Many pictures and statues can be seen in a Catholic church. In the year 1515, few people could read and books were hand made and very expensive, so pictures, either painted or leaded glass windows and statues, were used to tell the stories the church leaders wanted the people to know. The church service, called mass, was spoken in Latin. So all the scripture readings, prayers and songs were spoken in a language different from your language. How, you might wonder, did the church that Jesus started with a small group of faithful disciples, become such a huge organization, demanding taxes like a government?



Let's pretend that you are living in a small Central European village in the year 1515.

Adapted from a book, *The Stream and All In It*, by Fern Ruth, published by Mennonite Press Inc., 1975. Used by permission of the author.

Illustrations from UpStart Art, Illustration and design by Lee Eshleman, Harrisonburg, Va.

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2. Beginning of the Reformation

If you, as a child long ago, were raised as a member of the “Universal” church, people believed that when you died, before going to heaven, your soul would go to a place called “Purgatory.” Purgatory was a place where you would be cleaned by fire for a certain number of years, according to how many sins you had committed during your years on this earth.

Pope and indulgences

In those days the Pope (which means Father) of this Universal church in Rome was building a huge, new cathedral and needed lots of money to pay for the materials and workers. So he sent a monk named Tetzel to Central Europe to sell some papers called “Indulgences.” These papers stated that, in return for a certain sum of money, a certain number of sins were forgiven, and the buyer of the paper was excused from so many years in purgatory. You could get out of purgatory by paying extra money or saying extra prayers.

Saints

The Catholic church said that because of the great goodness of some people, called “saints,” they had extra good points stored up which they did not need, and these extra good points could be sold by the church. This might have worked in 1517 if the printing press had not been invented and come into common use. In fact, one of the first items printed by Johann Gutenberg on the press he invented was these “indulgence” papers. But another thing he printed was the Holy Bible. This meant that for the first time, people could learn to read and study the record of Jesus’ life and teachings themselves. They discovered that many of the teachings of the church were far different from the teachings of Jesus.

One of these people was a monk named Martin Luther. He objected especially to the sale of indulgences and hoped to persuade the church to correct some of its wrongs.

A new church

When some of the church leaders were too greedy and selfish to allow any change in church teaching, Luther and his followers formed a separate church, which we know today as the Lutheran Church. They were persecuted by the Catholic Church, but proved to be too strong to be destroyed.

In the German states where Luther’s teachings were followed, all people were required to become members of the Lutheran church. In Switzerland, men like Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin also broke away from the Catholic Church, and set up churches, which are known today as the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches, respectively. They, too, insisted that all people living in their areas must be members of the ruling church, and must bring their babies to be baptized into the new church.



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3. The Anabaptists

Adult baptism

Some of the men who worked with Zwingli were dissatisfied with the law requiring all citizens to become members of the “state” church. They thought that church membership should not be made automatic at birth, but rather that the church should be separated entirely from the government. They thought that only people who are willing to acknowledge publicly that they believe in Jesus, and want to live as he commands, should be baptized and become members of the church.

Zwingli, Calvin, Luther and other “State” church leaders did not agree with this teaching, and joined forces with the Catholics in an attempt to kill the movement. Laws were passed to force parents to bring their babies to the state churches for baptism; when the parents refused, they were persecuted, driven from state to state, and often killed.

In the year 1525, during a Bible study meeting, one of the early leaders baptized another, and he in turn baptized the others present in the room. After that time, this group of believers was called Anabaptist (again-baptizers or re-baptizers).

Martyrs

The earliest leaders of the Anabaptist movement were highly educated, intelligent men. They were the first to die for their beliefs in the years that followed. By the year 1530, most of the educated leadership had been martyred, and the leadership often fell in the hands of men who knew a lot about one book, the Bible, but very little about anything else.

Then unusual things began to happen. Sometimes leaders would decide that the world was to end upon a certain day. Simple-minded people believed them, sold all their belongings and followed them to strange places to wait for the end of the world.

War

Most of the Anabaptists believed that it was sinful to take part in warfare; but sometimes, some of these simple groups were led to believe that they were to take up arms to help God destroy “his” enemies.

History shows that almost all early groups of Anabaptists who took part in warfare and killing were themselves destroyed, and only the peaceful Anabaptists survived, some of who became the forerunners of the Mennonite church of today.



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4. Menno Simons

Menno Simons was a Catholic priest in Holland during the years of Anabaptist beginnings. He had heard of the Anabaptists and had thought a little about their teachings, but was unwilling to give up his good job as a Catholic priest, with its regular pay and secure position. But more and more he began to study the teachings of Jesus, and he began to doubt the teachings of the Catholic Church.

When he conducted Mass, he knew in his heart that no miraculous change took place to make the bread and wine turn into the body and blood of Christ.

Then one day Menno Simons' own brother was killed in an attack by the State upon a group of Anabaptists who were using swords to defend themselves. This influenced Menno Simons to live, as he believed God wanted him to. He put aside his priest's robes, gave up his steady pay, and joined a hunted and persecuted group. He was himself a hunted man, with a price on his head, to the end of his days.

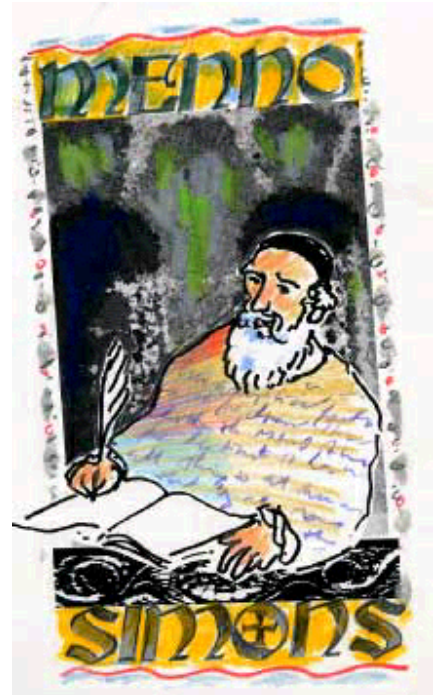
Reluctant leader

When the Anabaptists asked Menno Simons to become their leader, he was reluctant because he knew it would be a difficult task. But when he thought of the unnecessary troubles being brought upon these simple people because of ignorant and fanatical leadership, and how they were "like sheep with no shepherd," he assumed leadership of the church that was later to be known by his name.

The first record we have of "Menists" was in an order by Countess Anne who was the ruler of one of the small provinces in Europe. She signed a paper driving all Anabaptists from her province, with the exception of the peace-loving Anabaptists, known as "Menists." This established a pattern which was repeated many times in the years to come, that the Mennonites were often welcomed by rulers to their lands because they were hard working, peaceful, honest citizens.

Persecutions remained severe during these years in Holland, Switzerland, and Germany. Mennonites survived by moving continually from one province to another. When the ruler of one province decided to destroy all his subjects who would not join the state church, the Mennonites could usually find another ruler who welcomed them.

So the history of the Mennonites is a story of wandering from one country to another, losing their belongings again and again, and of refusing to defend their lives and possessions through armies and weapons.



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5. Arrival in America

Dutch Mennonites

Once, during the time of Queen Elizabeth I of England, a group of Mennonites took refuge in Britain. There, in the village of Scrooby, was a congregation led by John Smythe. In his congregation were William Bradford and other members of a group, which later became the Pilgrims who came to America on the Mayflower. There was close contact between this congregation and the Dutch Anabaptists.

Before the Pilgrims came to America, they spent some time in Holland, probably with the Dutch Mennonites. But when they could not have complete freedom of religion there, and saw their children begin to adopt Dutch speech and customs, they returned to England, and later sailed for America, taking with them some basic teachings they learned from the Mennonites, although they [Pilgrims] kept their practice of infant baptism. Today their descendants are the Congregational church in America.

Quakers

Besides the Congregationalists (Pilgrims) and the Baptists, a third English church group was influenced directly by the Dutch Mennonites. This group came to be known as the Friends or Quakers. The Congregationalists adopted the Mennonite (Congregational) form of church government, which gave each separate congregation complete control over its own affairs; the Baptists emphasized the Anabaptist teaching of adult baptism upon confession of faith; and the Friends agreed with the Mennonites in their firm stand against taking part in wars.

When the first English settlements were made in America, early Anabaptist attitudes became the backbone of American religious thinking and led directly to religious toleration and freedom as it is practiced today in America.

Some years later, when William Penn settled Pennsylvania with religious refugees from Europe, he toured Mennonite districts in Europe, offering religious freedom to the suppressed people if they would come to Pennsylvania. Many Mennonites settled in Pennsylvania at this time. Some of them became Quakers, but many of them kept their own religious identity.

The first written protest against slavery in America, which history books say was written by Quakers, was actually signed mostly by German Mennonites who had become Quakers, and was addressed to the American Quakers who at that time were accustomed to keeping slaves.

Educator

One of the most famous of early American teachers, Christopher Dock, was one of the early Pennsylvania Mennonites. He wrote the first handbook for teachers, "Pedagogy," published in America, which is still acknowledged to have been one of the best books ever written for schoolteachers. It was his custom to end each day with prayer for his schoolchildren. One evening in 1770, he was found dead on his knees in an attitude of prayer with his class roll before him.

Other innovators

In an entirely different field, the first American paper mill was established by William Rittenhouse, the first Mennonite pastor in America. His great-grandson, David, was a famous astronomer of Revolutionary days. David was a friend of Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, and was appointed by George Washington to be the first director for the United States mint. Mennonites were among the earliest Americans and they helped to establish America.

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6. European Mennonites

Farming

While these beginnings were underway in America, the European Mennonites were still wandering from one country to another, looking for religious freedom. They were often invited by dukes or princes to settle on poor lands where no other farmers could make a living. With hard work and good sense Mennonites reclaimed these lands in return for the promise of religious freedom and exemption from military service by the ruler of the land.

Persecution

When the Mennonites began to become prosperous the other subjects of the province often became jealous and protested to the prince that the Mennonites were receiving unfair advantages. Persecution would begin again.

Mennonites often were required to build their churches facing onto back streets and alleys; they were not allowed by law to call people to worship with the sound of a bell; they had to pay high taxes to avoid military service; and when they tried to leave one country and go to another, the country losing them often passed strict laws to try to keep their best farmers from leaving them.

When groups insisted upon leaving a country, the taxes imposed upon them as they left sometimes took most of their possessions, but many still gave up their possessions, and often their lives, rather than to give up their freedom of conscience.

Church laws and values

They had very few church laws (compared to "State" churches), no universally accepted written creed outside the New Testament, and insisted on living simply and purely, raising their children to follow the footsteps and teachings of Christ. Their church buildings were simple, and their Sunday services were long and probably very tiresome to children. They loved good music, and most of their church music consisted of German chorales.

Russian Mennonites

Congregations were scattered through Switzerland, Holland, Germany and Prussia. One of the interesting stories of Mennonite history is that of the Mennonites in Russia. In 1768, Catherine the Great of Russia had just won a war with the Turks, and acquired a great deal of land. She wanted good farmers for these lands, and invited persecuted people of all faiths to come and settle in Russia on these empty "Steppes" (the prairies of Russia.). Many German people settled there, and when the Mennonites were assured that they would not be required to do military service, some of them left their homes and started a new life, again, in Prussia.

As long as Catherine the Great lived, she honored her promise, but when new monarchs came into power, and started to insist on drafting Mennonite young men into the Russian army, the Mennonites again were insistent upon finding new homes. They had heard about America. Indeed, all through the years, and through many migrations, some Mennonites followed the earliest German settlers to America. But now, America seemed to be the only hope.

Switzerland, Germany and Russia all required military service of their young men, which many Mennonites still considered to be against the Law of Love as commanded by Jesus.



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7. Mennonite Church

Colonial times - Amish

Mennonites in America during colonial times and for some years after, were of two kinds: First, the Amish, followers of Jacob Amman, who were very strict about refusing to follow changes of fashion in dress and other such matters. Their clothes and customs today seem very quaint to most people, and many Americans who know very little about Mennonites think that all Mennonites are Amish.

The other kind of Mennonites in America during the 1700's were the ones who for many years were referred to as the (Old) Mennonites. Most other groups broke off from this main group at one time or another. The Amish branch separated from the main trunk while they were still in Switzerland and Alsace in 1693, largely because of their extremely conservative leaders.

Differences

There were other branches of the church that disagreed with the (Old) Mennonites for various reasons. Usually it was just a matter of human beings finding it very hard to love each other as Jesus had commanded; but this dislike was often hidden behind issues such as "worldliness," (that means trying too hard to be in style) or "coldness" (which means someone who doesn't do much more than just go to church Sunday morning).



The clothes and customs of the Amish today seem very quaint to most people, and many Americans who know very little about Mennonites think that all Mennonites are Amish.

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8. General Conference Mennonite Church

A new branch

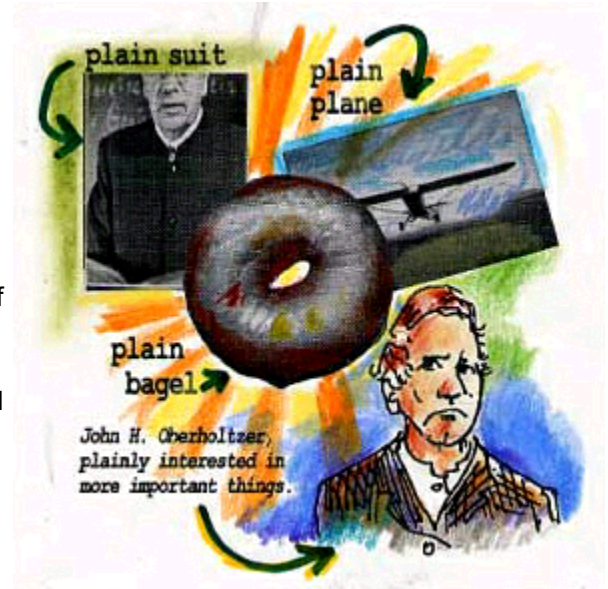
Among the (Old) Mennonite ministers, over 100 years ago, was a young man named John H. Oberholtzer. He was very conscientious, although he found it hard to agree with some of the older ministers with whom he worked. He felt that, in a number of ways, these older men were unfair in matters of church government, insisting on their own way—even in regard to small details such as the style of clothes he was to wear. He refused to wear the style of coat required by the men who controlled (Old) Mennonite Church policy at that time, and soon found himself, with some of his friends, starting a new branch of the Mennonite Church.

He began with the hope that all Mennonite groups would be persuaded to overlook their small differences of opinion and join together in a “general conference.” This conference was to be only an advisory group, and would not have the right to tell individual congregations how to handle their internal affairs. Styles of dress required and organizational setup within a church would not be tampered with by the Conference, but individual church members were to be free to change their membership from one conference church to another without embarrassment of any kind.

Growth

Growth of this new Conference was slow at first. Some Eastern and Canadian churches joined with him, but most (Old) Mennonites seemed to prefer to remain under a more strict organization. There were a few complete churches, parts of several others, and 16 ministers, who preferred a more liberal form of church government, and the movement, instead of bringing all Mennonite congregations together into a loose federation, became another branch of the Mennonite Church.

This branch was known for many years as the General Conference Mennonite Church. Many new immigrant Mennonites from Europe and Russia usually preferred to join the Oberholtzer groups rather than become (Old) Mennonites.



John H. Oberholtzer hoped that all Mennonite groups would be persuaded to overlook their small differences of opinion.

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9. Russian Immigration

In America, the Santa Fe Railroad had just finished putting in tracks halfway through the “desert” of Kansas. On either side of the railroad, the company owned 10 miles of land in alternating sections, for which it wanted good farmers, to insure freight movements back and forth along the tracks. Again, the Mennonites were invited to settle these lands on very liberal terms. After inquiring among existing Mennonite settlements in America in regard to the American position on conscientious objectors, and after a special law passed the Kansas legislature exempting them from compulsory National Guard duty, the Russo-German Mennonites agreed to come to America.

Other migrations

Other migrations of Mennonites from Europe to America had occurred all through American history; but the great numbers who came to Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota during these years in the later 1800s was one of the largest.

One contribution of these Russo-German Mennonites to the culture of America was that of wheat. Kansans up to that time were not very successful as wheat farmers because they were using “spring wheat” varieties of wheat that were planted in the spring in hopes of harvest in the fall. This was not practical because of the hot, dry Kansas summer.

Winter wheat

When the Mennonites came from the Russian Steppes in 1874, they brought with them choice plump kernels of “winter wheat”—wheat that could be planted in the fall because it was highly resistant to cold winter weather; and then could be harvested early in the summer. This helped to change Kansas into a prosperous wheat producing state.

When we call these people Russo-German, the term is used only to identify them by their migrations, since many of these people were of Dutch ancestry, and had not intermarried with the Russian people at all. They, as well as Swiss and South Germans, were of the main group of Mennonites and had not broken from any other Mennonite Church. But during their years in Europe, their customs had grown to differ substantially from (Old) Mennonite customs in America.

Mennonite Brethren

When the Mennonites from Russia were settling in Kansas, not all joined the General Conference. There had been severe differences of opinion back in Russia, where missionaries from other European Christian Churches had upset several Mennonite communities with accusations of coldness on the part of all Mennonites. One of these breaks consisted of a group of Mennonites who withdrew from the established Mennonite Church in Russia, calling themselves the Mennonite Brethren.

They emphasized a more emotional approach to religion and introduced baptism by immersion, feet washing (since discontinued by many congregations), and were more strict in church discipline, although this discipline did not state exactly what kind of clothing the church members should wear. When immigrating to America, the Mennonite Brethren did not join with the General Conference, but maintain their own denomination to this day.



On either side of the Santa Fe railroad, the company owned 10 miles of land in alternating sections for which they wanted good farmers.

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10. Current activities

Cooperation

When John Oberholtzer and certain other Mennonites tried to persuade "all branches of the Mennonite denomination in North America, regardless of minor differences, to extend to each other the hand of fellowship," the underlying motive was to work together in outreach and mission.

This attitude of cooperation grew especially in connection with Mennonite Central Committee and Voluntary Service programs, and spread to include work in the various mission fields.

Unification

The need for this kind of cooperation among Mennonites was brought to the attention of all concerned during the years when the United States was at war. Most Mennonites in America still believe, as did their great grandfathers, that killing fellow human beings, even in wartime, is in direct disobedience of God's Law of Love. Many people misunderstand the Mennonites' position on this question, and sometimes Mennonite conscientious objectors were badly treated because they would not obey army orders because they believed them to be contrary to the law of God.

Military service

It was found that if small scattered groups of Mennonites would join together and appeal to the United States government as a united group, the officials in government would pay more attention to them. Before World War II, through the efforts of capable, far-seeing leaders like Dr. Emmett L. Harshbarger of Bethel College, Kansas, Mennonites, Quakers, Brethren and other nonresistant church groups were allowed to organize camps of young men who believed it wrong to take part in war. These camps were called Civilian Public Service camps, and from these experiences, Mennonites generally began to believe that there are many things that conscientious young men can do to serve their country and God's Kingdom without serving in the military.

Today, all young people are encouraged to think through their beliefs about war long before their 18th birthday when men are required to register with Selective Service. Youth can keep a record of their convictions on a Christian Peacemaker Registration form provided by the church. When young men who are conscientious objectors to war register with Selective Service, they are encouraged to write, "I am a conscientious objector to war." on the form as an informal witness to their beliefs. Under current law, formal recognition of conscientious objectors would only happen if there were a military draft.

Young men and women can work as service volunteers to build up and help rather than enlisting in the military. You can work in places such as Europe, Asia, South America, Africa as well as North America.

Mental health work

Men who were drafted during WWII were often sent to mental hospitals to spend their two years, because it was hard to find workers for these institutions during the war years. It was found that in mental hospitals where conscientious objectors were working under the "Law of Love," a higher percentage of mental cases were cured than was usual with ordinary help. This opened a large new field for Mennonite service in the U.S., and contributed to great improvements in the care of mentally ill people.



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Conclusion

Because Mennonites are a small denomination and are often misunderstood, individual members sometimes take on an apologetic air when asked about their religious faith. In light of historical fact and present day practice, Mennonites can be happy that their faith principles have contributed to important values guiding the foundation and development of our government and society in North America.

Merger

Over the years many people thought it made sense for the (General Conference) Mennonites and the (Old) Mennonites to cooperate and join together. One of the first joint projects was combining their theological seminaries. By 1983, representatives of both groups voted to officially explore joining together, and in the year 2002, the two denominations formally joined as one "Mennonite Church USA." In Canada, the joined churches are called "Mennonite Church Canada."



Mennonite faith principles have contributed to important values guiding the foundation and development of North American society.