

**A BEACHY AMISH  
PERSPECTIVE ON  
THE ANABAPTIST VISION**

**BY M. BURT McGRATH**  
09/1994

Recently in his article discussing the effects of the Anabaptist vision on Mennonites in the past four decades, Levi Miller points out that the Vision was useful to both traditional and modern Mennonites. He concludes this discussion by observing: "Mennonites could be both modern and traditional by espousing the Anabaptist Vision."<sup>1</sup> But yet most discussions about the contemporary relevance of H. S. Bender's masterful statement have focused on those Mennonites who might fit the "modern" type of which Miller writes, with very little attention being paid to the possible contemporary relevance of the Vision for those Mennonite groups who lay claim to the "traditional" type.

This paper takes a look at the Anabaptist Vision in 1994 from the perspective of one of these groups, namely the Beachy Amish.<sup>2</sup> That the Anabaptist Vision has been of some level of influence is beyond dispute, even though the Beachy Amish as a group have not paid close attention to much of the historical, theological, and intellectual work being done among "modern" (or as I prefer, "mainstream") Mennonites of the past five decades. It is the purpose of this paper to look more closely at what a Beachy Amish perspective on the Anabaptist Vision might look like but also, and perhaps more importantly, what relevance both now and in the future the Anabaptist Vision might hold for the life of the Beachy Amish.

In an effort to outline such a perspective, this paper will begin with an introduction to the Beachy Amish, how they interpret the themes of the Anabaptist Vision, and finally what might the future relevance of the Anabaptist Vision be for the Beachy Amish. The material for this perspective draws on a recent survey of Beachy Amish responses to the Anabaptist Vision, as well as drawing on my own membership among the Beachy Amish, a fact which undoubtedly helps form the direction which such a discussion takes. For this is more than an exercise of academic interest for me, but is based on my hope that the Beachy Amish will learn from the work of scholars and churchmen such as H. S. Bender in gaining a greater appreciation and understanding of their Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage.

10-15-94

Donated by Russ McEach

## I. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BEACHY AMISH

In his 1988 book, Mennonite Identity in Conflict, Leo Driedger presents the idea of an "Anabaptist Identification Continuum" as a way of making sense out of the many diverse Anabaptist-Mennonite subgroups.<sup>3</sup> Such an idea, with the Hutterites at one end and the urban Mennonites at the other, would place the Beachy Amish as somewhere to the right side of this continuum. They are more change-oriented than the Amish, but not so much as the urban or "mainstream" Mennonite groups. The purpose of this section is to offer a brief history and analysis of the Beachy Amish to set the stage for giving a Beachy Amish perspective on the Anabaptist Vision.

### A. A Brief History of the Beachy Amish

In the 1890's, among many of the Old Order Amish groups there arose the debate over excommunication and strict shunning of those excommunicated. It was in the soil of this "shunning controversy" that the origins of the first Beachy Amish congregations are to be found. For the two congregations which were the first of what is known as the Beachy Amish arose during this controversy, those congregations being the Weavertown group in Lancaster County and the Somerset County, Pennsylvania, group from which the name Beachy Amish is derived.

The name "Beachy Amish" is taken from Moses M. Beachy, who was the bishop of the change-oriented group in the Somerset Division of 1927, which is the date of the official beginning of the group of churches who call themselves Beachy Amish. In Somerset County, there arose a debate over whether to apply "strict shunning" to those who left the Old Orders to join a Conservative Amish Mennonite group. This issue arose because of transfers from the Old Order group in Somerset County to an Amish Mennonite

group in Garrett County, Maryland. When Moses M. Beachy was ordained as bishop in Somerset County in 1915, he let it be known that he would not excommunicate or shun those Old Orders who joined the Conservative Amish Mennonite church in Garrett County, Maryland.

This decision was not acceptable to the more conservative members of his congregation and several of his co-ministers led by Noah M. Yoder and his father, the "inactive" elder bishop Moses Yoder. Several years were spent in various attempts at reconciling the growing differences between the two groups, but in June, 1927, the group favoring the stricter application of the ban and shunning withdrew, marking the "official" beginning of the churches which have come to be called the Beachy Amish Fellowship. The other original congregation which formed the first Beachy Amish Fellowship churches, the congregation in Lancaster County, which has since become known as "Weavertown", who had withdrawn from the Old Orders due also to the question of the application of shunning earlier in 1909, began to have fraternal relationships with the congregation in Somerset County in 1929, and together they helped to form other congregations as part of this new movement as other groups began to move in directions similar to those of the Beachy and Weavertown congregations.<sup>4</sup>

The next twenty year period, from 1930-1950, saw slow growth in the number of Old Order Amish congregations who were attracted to the new movement and asked for help in organizing their own congregation as "Beachy Amish". These years saw the movement spread to churches in Northern Indiana, Holmes County, Ohio, Kansas, Virginia, and other states. Some of these newer congregations were formed with help given by Moses Beachy and John A. Stoltzfus (bishop at Weavertown) while others were started by movement to new locations, and still others formed on their own and then sought affiliation with the new Fellowship. And so what began as an attempt at resolving issues in the two local congregations in Somerset and Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, spread so that the fellowship which began in 1927 with an estimated

2 congregations and 260 members had become, as H. S. Bender notes in the Mennonite Quarterly Review in 1955, a fellowship of 21 congregations and 1,500 members.<sup>5</sup>

The 1950's was a very important decade in the history of the Beachy Amish movement. During this decade, the various churches opened themselves to the revivals and mission activity which was also impacting the mainstream Mennonite world in the immediate post-WW II period. In fact, during this period, the Beachy Amish owed much to the developments in the broader Mennonite world, and especially developments in organizing mission activity. In the early 1950's, there arose a heightened awareness of the importance of involvement in mission activity outside of the local congregations. This "quickening" expressed itself in the formation in 1955 of Amish Mennonite Aid (AMA) which came as a result of Minister Joe Roth's vision for a Beachy Amish organization for directing mission efforts and modeled on the efforts of the Mennonite Central Committee, under which Roth had served in Europe after the war. Also this decade saw the formation of the Mennonite Interest Committee (MIC), which was to function in directing mission activities much as AMA did, but with more of a focus on work in the Americas. These two organizations still are central to Beachy Amish life and serve as directing agencies for mission and relief activity sponsored by the Beachy Amish in various parts of the world.

The period of 1960-1970 continued to show the increased mission activity among the Beachy Amish, with the focus centering on Central America, with mission churches being established throughout that region beginning in the early 1960's. By the middle of the 1970's, the amount of new mission activity had slowed and the emphasis was placed on developing the existing programs and also in developing the life of the Beachy Amish congregations in the United States. This last goal found expression in the formation of the Calvary Bible School in Arkansas in 1970, and the founding of the Calvary Messenger in the same year. CBS continues to serve as an institution for educating Beachy Amish young people in

Biblical studies, and the Calvary Messenger serves as a publication for the reading edification of the Beachy Amish as well as keeping the scattered congregations abreast of events occurring among the other congregations.

Both of these later two events were crucial because they enabled the Beachy Amish to provide their people with necessary Biblical instruction as well as good literature, without having to rely on groups or organizations outside of the fellowship to provide these elements which they believed to be so fundamental to fostering growth and unity among the scattered congregations and people who made up the rapidly growing Beachy Amish Fellowship.

The 1980's and 1990's have witnessed a strengthening of the new organizations begun in earlier decades as well as a continued growth of new churches, new mission activity, and the development of ways of providing for those who are part of the Beachy Amish Fellowship with new activities and programs which are necessary for strengthening the unity of the group despite its scattered nature. This period also saw a sharp increase in new institutions and organizations such as new publishing ventures, literature ministries, and mission activity in such new areas as Ireland, Kenya, Belgium, and Australia. All this activity helped to provide the group's members with the necessary tools for spiritual and mental development without having to rely too strongly on outside movements for providing these, although part of the thesis of this paper is that the Beachy Amish Fellowship has not done enough to provide for these needs and to help make it possible to avoid too much of an over-dependence on other groups for the needs of the Beachy Amish Fellowship.

And so in 1994, the Beachy Amish Fellowship has developed from a local movement in Pennsylvania to a movement which has members and congregations in 23 states and 10 countries (other

than the U.S.). But if we are to understand more clearly the Beachy Amish we must look briefly at a descriptive account of these congregations and people who make up the Beachy Amish Fellowship.

#### **B. The Beachy Amish in 1994.**

Trying to provide an answer to the question regarding the identity of the Beachy Amish is very difficult. Due to the diversity of origins in the establishment of each individual Beachy Amish congregation, the lack of a conference structure with the unity which it brings, just to list a few of the difficulties, attempting to give a specific definition of Beachy Amish identity is very difficult. Rather such identity exists as a rough accepted framework which allows for considerable diversity and freedom of expression from one local congregation to another.

The official name of the group is that of Beachy Amish Mennonite, thus combining the names of three important historical leaders who are accepted as very important to the groups' self-understanding. But in reality very few of the congregations actually use "Beachy Amish" in a congregation name, opting for either Amish Mennonite or simply using the latter title followed by Fellowship. In fact, a study of congregational names will reveal that "Fellowship" appears most frequently which is interesting for what it tells of the understanding of church and not just as a name. <sup>6</sup>

A central feature of Beachy Amish life and identity is the strong belief in the autonomy of each local congregation even with their being an accountability to a broader understanding of identity, but this accountability does not take a regimented and institutionalized form, i.e. conference structure. And even recent events which showed an interest in moving toward a conference type, illustrated this strong belief in local autonomy by the reaction to what would happen if this became a reality. <sup>7</sup>

Beachy Amish understandings of church and of life in general are rooted in a firm belief and acceptance of what has so often been labeled "two-kingdoms theology". This idea helps explain many of the ways of thinking and practices which the Beachy Amish people accept and live out. Their understanding of two kingdoms could be called a "strict" reading of there being a distinct difference between the church and the world, a dualism which is often found in Beachy Amish thinking and writing. This finds expression, for example, in a rejection of political involvement, as well as in their acceptance of distinct dress patterns. The dualism involved in such a perspective is quite strong and not likely to disappear or be moved away from any time soon, even among those who could be called the "progressives" among the Beachy Amish. But although there is a firm acceptance of the two kingdoms approach, the boundaries which define these kingdoms is and continues to be increasingly ambiguous for many among the Beachy Amish. In other words, the boundaries of this distinction which were accepted as normative, are beginning to shift among certain groups of Beachy Amish.

With these shifting boundaries in mind, we return to the point of diversity in thinking and acting which is a fact of life among the Beachy Amish. This diversity could be stated as being expressed by the existence of three main groups within the fellowship. They would be the "progressives", "traditionalists", and "moderates", although the moderate group is very little in evidence in relation to the two more dominant groups. The progressives are more open to change and are more reluctant to resist change simply because it is change. The traditionalists, on the other hand, are very reluctant at times to even admit that change is occurring preferring to posit that any "change" is due to "unfaithfulness" or "apostasy". But even those congregations who would fit the traditionalist conception are changing, while often refusing to admit that the changes are occurring, because they often are in so-called "small" areas.

A useful conceptual way of providing an analysis of the differences between the two groups within

the Beachy Amish, is to look at the information adaptation theory of sociologist Orrin Klapp. Klapp describes how each society or group faces how to deal with an increase in information and needs to develop strategies for dealing with this increased flow of information in determining what from this new information will be accepted and what will be rejected and what this means for the identity of the group. He introduces the concepts of "closing" and "opening" as basic strategies for dealing with this increase information.<sup>8</sup> Opening takes the attitude of opening traditional ideas in order to incorporate the good from the new information, while closing takes the attitude of shutting out what is considered harmful from among this new information. Both strategies are necessary, if a society or group is to use what Klapp refers to as "good opening" and "good closing" as opposed to "bad opening" or "bad closing".<sup>9</sup>

When applied to the Beachy Amish, the progressives are the ones who put an emphasis on developing "opening" strategies, while the traditionalists place a strong emphasis on developing stronger and well-defined "closing". While both opening and closing strategies are evident in both groups, each puts the emphasis on a specific strategy. The diversity among the Beachy Amish and the identity problems which it is currently causing is rooted in this difference in strategies for dealing with increased information, and any way of adequately dealing with this identity "conflict" and preserve the "unity" of the Beachy Amish must look carefully at this issue of information adaptation and what the theories developed have to say about the boundary maintenance of the group, and especially as it relates to the definition of the lines between the two kingdoms of church and world in a Beachy Amish perspective.

The Beachy Amish Fellowship work at trying to balance strong boundary maintenance and the development of the ingroup, with a strong missionary spirit. The missionary impulse was part of the influence from the Mennonite church during the 1950's when models were received by the Beachy Amish from other Mennonite groups. And still today the missionary spirit is very much a central feature of the

Beachy Amish understanding of the church. Unlike their more conservative cousins, the Amish, they emphasize missions to those outside the local and perhaps ethnic communities, but unlike their more liberal cousins, the "mainstream" Mennonite groups, they put a strong emphasis on a stricter appreciation of boundary maintenance in continuing to practice many of the so-called "cultural" practices which were more common in past Mennonite history. They try to balance a maintenance of the community with an evangelical spirit that leads them to a vital missionary program.

The Beachy Amish today are a fellowship in the midst of the growth and in the early stages of what might be called, for lack of a better term, an "identity crisis". In the sixty-seven years of their existence, they have moved from a membership of 260 in 1927 to a membership of 7,678 in 1994.<sup>10</sup> There also has been a growth from one congregation (1927) to one hundred twenty-one congregations. Although this growth might be explained by large families, yet it cannot be completely accounted for by this, because of the number of people who have joined the group from the outside. This growth has had many different results among the Beachy Amish, one of which is that it has served to increase the diversity among the various Beachy Amish congregations. And this has resulted in the fact that the Beachy Amish are not one large unified group, a mistake often made by Mennonite writers when discussing the group, and this has also hastened the "identity crisis" which is in various stages among the Beachy Amish congregations.

This "identity crisis" comes from their being a lack of clear understanding of what basis upon which to build an understanding of what defines the group as Beachy Amish. Is it on a common set of practices where there is more cultural unity, or is this unity to be defined in broader terms with room for greater diversity with regard to the applications of broader principles? Some among the Beachy Amish are pushing for sharpening the boundaries of acceptable practices and drawing these boundaries in a much more clearly defined way, while others suggest the desirability of allowing a greater diversity around the

identity question. Also involved is the question of change, is change to be resisted because it is change, or accepted and dealt with as it happens. The result of this indecision is that it is difficult, when asked, to suggest a clear definition of what or who Beachy Amish are.

This problem comes from the fact that decisive changes are occurring among the Beachy Amish, and too many people are going about life as if the changes have not happened or as if they are not important. Some would argue that these changes are nothing more than small cultural changes, but in reality they are changes which might be such but have a much deeper and more far-reaching implication. For they have the potential of eroding teachings which the Beachy Amish hold dear, and to erode from the inside as these changes are not seen as significant.

These changes which are occurring slowly, but are often ignored or side-lined include rising economic status, changing levels of education, uncritical acceptance of values of American society, and the acceptance of outside ideas and terms which are used to defend traditional perspectives without realizing the long term eroding effect that they will have on those very traditional perspectives that they are used to defend. One example of this is that fundamentalist theology and doctrine is used to defend a conservative theology without understanding that this is not necessary, and in the end is very dangerous, to traditional perspectives. And it is to help navigate through these changes that I believe a greater appropriation of the Anabaptist Vision will be not only helpful but necessary for the future of the Beachy Amish.

## **II. A BEACHY AMISH PERSPECTIVE ON THE ANABAPTIST VISION**

Now that this paper has developed a brief introduction to the Beachy Amish as a group, we can look at the question of what might be a possible Beachy Amish perspective on the Anabaptist Vision of

Bender which we are gathered to discuss and remember in this conference.

#### **A. Contact Between the Vision and the Beachy Amish**

Before discussing what a Beachy Amish perspective on the Vision might look like, we need to look at the access which the Beachy Amish have had to the Vision and the familiarity with it that exists. This is especially important because the Beachy Amish as a group have not always kept in touch with the scholarship and research being done by "mainstream" Mennonite groups and even the scholarship which for many of us is so familiar and part of the 20th century Mennonite mind, is not so familiar to others.

Based on the research which came through in the responses to the author's personal survey for this paper, it became clear that some of the Beachy Amish were previously familiar with the Anabaptist Vision of Bender, but this was not true in a broad way. At least not in having knowledge of the writing of Bender, even though the central ideas of what Bender wrote had a greater familiarity. But there were a number of respondents who did reveal a familiarity with Bender's Vision statement, and a number of these had personal contact with Bender, either in hearing him preach or in being his students at Goshen College in the 1950's and 1960's. Also some of this familiarity came, in at least one documented case and I'm sure this is true in more cases, from Beachy Amish individuals gaining access to the ideas with which Bender worked while spending time in the CPS camp in the Second World War.<sup>11</sup> And still others related that the Anabaptist Vision was encountered as they were studying Anabaptist/Mennonite history and helped them to accept Anabaptist/Mennonite ideas as their own.<sup>12</sup>

The Anabaptist Vision as articulated by Bender also has found its way into the preaching and teaching of leaders among the Beachy Amish. Two of the respondents to the author's survey indicated that

they have found Bender's writing very useful and have used it in preparing sermons as well as their own personal writings on Anabaptism. One of these, Lester Gingerich, draws on Bender's Anabaptist Vision in a book he wrote on the nature of the church several years ago.<sup>13</sup> Also in a recent article on nonresistance, another minister drew on the Anabaptist Vision discussion of this issue.<sup>14</sup>

Undoubtedly, the one Beachy Amish leader who has done the most to familiarize the Beachy Amish with the Anabaptist Vision and to popularize Bender's ideas has been the writer and evangelist, William McGrath. McGrath was a student of Bender's at Goshen College in the early 1950's and his understanding of Anabaptism (he came from a Roman Catholic background) came from his appropriation of Bender's work. McGrath has spent many years in encouraging scholarship and historical study among the Beachy Amish and his voluminous writing has helped to introduce many people not only to Bender and the Anabaptist Vision, but also to Anabaptist history in general.<sup>15</sup> It was through his teaching, as my father, that I first learned of the Anabaptist Vision and from him, I learned very early to develop my own passion for Anabaptist history.

And so while the level of familiarity with the Bender's written Anabaptist Vision is at best low among the Beachy Amish, yet it's influence has been felt because of leaders who have found it a crucial and useful synthesis of Anabaptist life and thought. Also while Bender's document may not be recognizable to many people, they have arrived at many of the ideas which he expressed either through personal study of many of the same sources or through the influence of those who picked up ideas from the Anabaptist Vision of Bender and passed them along, although perhaps without making special reference to the Anabaptist Vision as a written source. The influence of the ideas contained in the Anabaptist Vision have been far greater than the document itself.

## **B. A Look at the Themes of the Anabaptist Vision from a Beachy Amish Perspective**

As is well known, Bender's Anabaptist Vision was centered on the idea that Anabaptism was based on the three central ideas of discipleship, the church as a brotherhood, and an ethic or life of peace and nonresistance. And so we will offer a contemporary Beachy Amish perspective on those three, as well as looking at several criticisms of the Vision which arose out of the survey research done by the author.

### **1. DISCIPLESHIP**

The first principle which defined the Anabaptist Vision for Bender was expressed in the words: "... the conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship." And with this conception, the Beachy Amish would quickly agree. For them, as for Bender, the Christian faith is first and foremost about discipleship or a life of following Jesus. They, like Bender, would accept that the genius of the Anabaptists was their insistence in the necessity of understanding the Christian life as essentially about living out the demands of faith.

For the Beachy Amish, this discipleship has daily consequences and not just in major issues such as peace, justice, and equality. In the words of a Beachy Amish minister, "The essence of the Christian faith as discipleship to know Christ truly, follow Him daily."<sup>16</sup> This means that we are called to put into daily practice, what we have accepted through faith. This has radical implications for the daily life of Christians, implications which were more clearly understood by a previous generation of Beachy Amish, but which are being lost on the younger generation. The younger generation too often reserves discipleship for the "big" issues such as rejection of force, and being involved in missionary activities. But they often fail to place all of life, and I think here especially of economic practices, under the light of the call to a

radical everyday discipleship, which is part of a Beachy Amish perspective on life following the Scriptures and as articulated so well in history by the Anabaptists.

For the Beachy Amish, discipleship is meant to be applied to every part of one's daily life. This is because "Unexpressed faith is not faith."<sup>17</sup> And discipleship when understood in this light has application in all of social life and impacts everything from our choice of clothing, entertainment, and how we conduct our economical affairs. The Beachy Amish have developed certain patterns of life which express what this discipleship means in practice, and it is the firm belief of this author that the "mainstream" Mennonite groups could learn much from the Beachy Amish on this point. Not that they would need to copy the practices of the Beachy Amish, but rather that they need to ask more seriously what discipleship might mean when choosing such practical things as clothing, entertainment, and economic affairs.

## 2. THE CHURCH AS A BROTHERHOOD

The Beachy Amish firmly believe that it is essential to understand the church as a brotherhood. The church is not just a group of individuals who are united only around gathering together for worship services and other religious observances. But the church is a community of brotherhood in that the total social life of each member finds meaning in the practice of this brotherhood. Everything that we do must be done by weighing the effects such an action will have on the community.

For the Beachy Amish, understanding the church as brotherhood must be central to any adequate understanding of what Anabaptism was all about. This conception of brotherhood is essential because it provides each member of the community of fellow disciples with the resources for living the life called for by the call to be disciples for Jesus. This concept of brotherhood calls for a high level of accountability of

each member to the brotherhood as a whole. It also calls the community and brotherhood to be willing to provide the necessary help, financial and spiritual, to a member who may be in need. One of the features of the Beachy Amish which continues to attract me and which keeps me close, is this strong sense of responsibility of the community or brotherhood for each member. For the Beachy Amish this means drawing on brotherhood aid instead of a heavy reliance on the insurance and financial support of institutions from outside of the brotherhood or community. While this may not always be possible, yet it must be maintained as a central principle of any group which claims to be living out the "Anabaptist Vision" in any age.

The Beachy Amish understanding of brotherhood is captured in the concept of "one-anothering", to borrow the title of a book written by Simon Schrock, a bishop among the Beachy Amish.<sup>18</sup> The point of brotherhood concept is that each member of the community is called to act in the interest of the others. This conception flies in the face of American individualism which has influenced most religious groups in the American context in one way or another. Even among the Beachy Amish, individualism has become a growing danger. But if we remain as followers of the "Anabaptist Vision", this concept of brotherhood must be maintained and its implications carefully allowed to be practiced in the life of our communities, whatever Mennonite, or otherwise, group we may be a part of.

### 3. ETHIC OF LOVE AND NONRESISTANCE

Also essential to an adequate understanding of the vision of the Anabaptists is the idea of life being governed by the ethic of love and nonresistance. It is on this theme, that the Beachy Amish would perhaps differ the most from other contemporary Mennonite interpreters of Bender's understanding of peace/nonresistance.

The Beachy Amish retain much of the traditional Mennonite language of nonresistance, and they have questioned the move from nonresistance to non-violence as an adequate move. Not that their appropriation of the principle of peace is without problems and they many times have failed to be nonresistant in some of their community practices, but yet they would want to ask if the move to non-violence and an emphasis on peace/justice has not ignored, perhaps, subtle changes that are not altogether positive.

For the Beachy Amish, nonresistance is expressed most clearly in the rejection of force and serving in the military, but they don't accept that these practices exhaust the meaning of nonresistance. For as one older Beachy Amish bishop put it, "I believe that nonresistance is a way of life. It is more than not going to war or taking up arms, but how we react toward our brothers or even animals."<sup>19</sup> A Beachy Amish view of nonresistance is based on this broader view of the meaning, even though many today too often understand it simply as the rejection of army service or using arms against another person. The qualities of love and nonresistance must be a part of a total way of life and not just applicable to a limited number of social actions.

A Beachy Amish view on nonresistance also is rooted in the acceptance of the two-kingdoms concept which leads them to remove themselves from active involvement in the political system. Some among them undoubtedly would label this as "a-political", but it is more the taking of a specific political stance, that of choosing a distinctive option of non-involvement in politics, than it is to be "a-political".

Looking at Bender's comments on love and nonresistance, a Beachy Amish perspective would want to ask other Mennonite interpreters of the "Anabaptist Vision" if their new approaches are hiding subtle changes which need to be questioned. This is not to say that the traditional position on peace, that of

nonresistance is without problems, that the Beachy Amish practice of this is totally consistent with the ideal, or even that they cannot learn much from other Mennonite interpretations of what peace and nonresistance means. For indeed the Beachy Amish could learn much from a greater dialogue with the newer approaches of nonviolence and peace/justice in helping to correct some of their own failures to live consistently in practicing peace and love for all. But it does mean that the Beachy Amish would remain skeptical of the new approaches and not just take them over as superior to the traditional approach of talking in the language of nonresistance. If this dialogue were to take place those advocating the new approaches must be willing to listen carefully to the concerns of people such as the Beachy Amish and not just write off their concerns as the result of a narrow, "rural" experience. A dialogue which takes both approaches seriously is lacking in current discussions on the implications of love, peace, and nonresistance and without such a dialogue both approaches among Mennonites will continue to talk past each other with no hope of accepting the value which can be found in both positions.

The Beachy Amish would find Bender's description of nonresistance more in line with where they are ideologically, although they need to be concerned with asking the critical questions of adequacy and consistency of their own practice of this important theme of the Anabaptist Vision.

#### 4. QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ADEQUACY OF BENDER'S FORMULATION OF THE ANABAPTIST VISION

Part of the survey which was conducted in preparing this paper asked the participants to give any criticisms they might have of how the Anabaptist Vision is formulated, and if there were any elements of their understanding of the Christian experience which they found missing in this formulation.

While most of the respondents agreed primarily with the formulation of Bender, yet there were several points which came through as question marks of Bender's declaration.

First, was the question of worship. One respondent, Steve Russell commented that he found, "... a clear sense of worship . . .", to be one of the missing items in what Bender had written.<sup>20</sup> This is a problem not only of Bender's work, but it could be suggested as a weakness of so much of the Neo-Anabaptist writing from Bender on. The ethical impulse is so strong that worship or spirituality is often given inadequate attention. There is a lack of awe for the divine, a weakness that I believe is part of the Anabaptist tradition. Although it need not be part of our Anabaptist heritage, the fact is that it is there. Russell also suggested that this lack of a clear sense of worship is lacking among the Beachy Amish, and I heartily concur. We, like many other groups who are part of the Anabaptist tradition, have placed too much emphasis on the ethical and not enough on worship and spirituality.

This leads us into a second critique of the Vision, that of an overemphasis on human ethical action at the expense of placing an importance of sometimes just stepping back and allowing God to act. This undoubtedly could be called more of a critique of the post-Bender interpreters of the Vision, but yet the seeds for this approach were there in the original Vision whether Bender intended them or not.

This is not to say that human ethical action is not needed or important but we need to acknowledge that there comes a time when all human action fails to meet the need and we need to just stop and wait on God to act in His own time. But as part of the Anabaptist tradition, many Mennonites have stressed the importance of human ethical action, through the stress on discipleship and an "evidenced faith" that we find it very difficult to step back from that constant action. This is a problem among the Beachy Amish, as well, where the stress on human action has been interpreted as being evidenced in the following of the community

guidelines and to fail is to fail as Christians. There is a lack or perhaps an inability to talk seriously about grace, without seeing an emphasis on grace as somehow something which is borrowed from a "non" Anabaptist tradition. The recent essay by Steve Dintaman, I believe, expresses this point quite well, in that he raises the question about our inability to talk about grace and spirituality because the focus has been on human ethical action through discipleship.<sup>21</sup>

### **III. THE ANABAPTIST VISION AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR THE FUTURE OF THE BEACHY AMISH**

One of the reasons for the present conference is the hope that it might provide a forum for reflection on the contemporary relevance of Bender's Anabaptist Vision for the contemporary churches of the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition. Is the era of Bender's "Vision" over, or can it continue to have relevance and meaning for us who live fifty years later? One of the underlying purpose of this essay was to address that question from the perspective of the Beachy Amish community, and so we turn to a more concentrated look at that question.

First of all, recall that earlier in this paper, note was made of an "identity crisis" among the Beachy Amish. This was used to refer to the growing lack of consensus about the identity of the group, how is such a group to be defined as distinct? Part of this identity crisis is the changing shape of the congregations which make up the Beachy Amish, with changing levels of education, occupations, and economic status. These changes have begun to bring a greater diversity of ideas as well as social positions into the Beachy Amish fellowship. And it is in relation to this growing diversity of ideas which the Anabaptist Vision of Bender can be seen as having the greatest potential value. Not only in providing content but also in being a useful example for the task of constructing a credible and adequate understanding of Beachy Amish

identity that takes seriously all the diversity and does not cut short any of the expressions of that diversity without giving each of them careful consideration.

Part of the thesis of this paper is that the Beachy Amish are in need of a unifying Vision, which can be used to unite the group while celebrating a certain amount of the diversity which is part of its life. Too many among the Beachy Amish lack a clear vision, except the desire to maintain the status quo, and this approach is running out of steam for a growing number among the younger generation of Beachy Amish. The continued lack of a more adequate Vision will continue to drain off those who feel left out in the current state of affairs. One respondent to the author's survey, saw this lack of vision as one of the greatest problems currently facing the Beachy Amish. His concern was that the methods of life were being used that were useful when the churches emerged from the Old Order group, but yet those methods, while useful to an earlier generation, are inadequate for the younger generation of today.<sup>22</sup> And this leaves some of the younger generation, the author included, feeling on the edge of the community, perhaps much like the "stranger" of sociologist Georg Simmel.<sup>23</sup>

How then would such a new vision develop and what relevance would the Anabaptist Vision of Bender have the development of such a perspective? There are several ways that this could be answered, and here I want to give only a few suggestions.

First, part of this problem which has contributed to this "identity crisis" is in the words of Steve Russell: "... a very bad attitude toward our own heritage and tradition."<sup>24</sup> I would like to suggest that this comes in part because of a lack of understanding our heritage, and especially in understanding and knowing our Anabaptist heritage. Too often our Anabaptist heritage is called upon only to defend a position which we are trying to uphold, and one does not also seek to have a broader understanding of the

implications of claiming to be part of the Anabaptist tradition. This finds expression in the fact that the Beachy Amish depend too much on other Mennonite groups to do the hard work of scholarship on Anabaptist history and are unwilling to do that themselves except when they need to defend a specific position. Part of constructing this new vision will include ending this approach and beginning to do the hard work of scholarship which is necessary to have a better understanding of our Anabaptist heritage.

And here Bender's Vision can serve as a model for doing that work. Not that we will only take over what Bender found in his work. But we will use his ideas as a model for how to go about doing this work of understanding our heritage.

A second point, which builds from the first, is that due to a lack of a greater knowledge and awareness of the Anabaptist tradition, leads to the acceptance of "outside" theological trends and ideas, without realizing the negative impact that these ideas will have in the long run on the ideas and principles of their Anabaptist heritage which the Beachy Amish are at the very least committed to. Thus influences from theological traditions are felt, but there is not an adequate framework or vision which can be used to evaluate each new theological influence and the result is "outside" ideas are becoming part of the Beachy Amish identity. This happens often without people realizing it.

Another part of this problem is that like any other group, the Beachy Amish have their "brokers" and their "plausibility structures". These brokers serve to bring back to the community the new knowledge which they have gained from other communities and to put the best of these to use in explaining and elaborating on the plausibility structures which explain the beliefs and practices of the Beachy Amish. The problem arises, not with the fact that this is happening, but with the theological influences these brokers are bringing back and inserting into the ideas and life of their communities.

One of the theological influences which these brokers are bringing back to the Beachy Amish community and then inserting into the life of the community in the attempts to shore up the plausibility structures of their communities is Fundamentalism. Now I raise the criticism of Fundamentalism very cautiously, especially since in so much of recent Mennonite scholarship, Fundamentalism becomes the way of criticizing any attitude or perspective that is being rejected.<sup>25</sup> Among the Beachy Amish, this appropriation of Fundamentalism comes as a result of trying to defend a conservative theological orientation, and Fundamentalist theology is seen as the best way of doing this. At the present, Fundamentalism among the Beachy Amish appears primarily in the appropriation of a "dogmatic" attitude which cannot tolerate diversity and differences.<sup>26</sup> But it also takes the form of assuming that Fundamentalist theology is the same as historic Christian theology and that the ideas and doctrines of Fundamentalism are the best way of developing and explaining a conservative theological position. This leads some of the brokers to introduce language and ideas which are important and essential to a Fundamentalist into the language of the Beachy Amish. And the result is that anyone in the group who finds it difficult to accept this language is seen as somehow "losing" historic and conservative Christianity.

One of the importances of a greater appropriation of Bender's formulation of the Anabaptist Vision is that it will be a benefit in developing and developing a conservative theological vision that avoids the dangers of Fundamentalism, and which is able to deal constructively with the diversity which is a fact of Beachy Amish life and which will become even more so in the future, if present trends are any indication. Just as the Anabaptist Vision was intended to offer the Mennonite Church a third way between Fundamentalism and Modernism earlier in this century, so, too, it can serve as a model that will be useful for the Beachy Amish in developing a similar vision to steer it through the influences of Fundamentalism and developing a framework dealing with outside influence of every type and variety. This will be done not by just taking over Bender's formulation and stopping there, but by using the example of what Bender has

done to go on and develop what one Beachy Amish leader calls "Conservative Anabaptism".<sup>27</sup> This will help the Beachy Amish to maintain a conservative theological position, but one which is rooted in its Anabaptist heritage and not one borrowed from Fundamentalism or other conservative Protestant systems of thought.

One way of making the Vision of Bender a more useful source, would be to give it a role in the teaching programs of the Beachy Amish churches. The late Noah Keim suggested that possibly the contemporary relevance of the Vision for the Beachy Amish would be its usefulness for such teaching programs.<sup>28</sup> This would mean making the Vision more accessible to the people, as well as drawing more on the ideas of the Vision in developing the content of the teaching programs of the Beachy Amish Fellowship.

In summary, this paper has suggested that the Anabaptist Vision of H. S. Bender has the potential of being a useful source for helping the Beachy Amish Fellowship navigate through the rough waters of the "identity crisis" it is beginning to become embroiled in. This formulation will serve as a model for the Beachy Amish as they seek to make a greater appropriation of their Anabaptist heritage and to learn how to develop the plausibility structures of a conservative theological orientation which will be developed out of a close and thorough study of Anabaptism.

As the Beachy Amish develop the vision which is hinted at in this paper, they can develop the methods necessary for dealing with the diversity within their own ranks, as well as in developing more adequate ways of relating to "mainstream" Mennonite groups and ideas. This last point is very important because if the Beachy Amish are to gain a deeper appropriation of their Anabaptist/Mennonite heritage they must not only to their own work in this, but they must also be more willing to listen to other Mennonite

voices. Not that they must or need to give up the convictions which they hold to, such as a particular dress or rejection of TV or radio, which they see as lacking among other Mennonite groups. But they must learn how to more adequately deal with other Mennonites despite these differences.

The vision suggested in this paper will also be necessary if the Beachy Amish are to navigate through the processes of change which are currently happening and which seem likely to continue in the future, without giving into the two extremes of either rejecting all change and withdrawing back into a very closed version of community or to just open the flood gates of change and have no distinctive vision or life left.

If this vision can be constructed and implemented, the process will never be easy, the Beachy Amish will be able to capture the genius of the work of H. S. Bender. Only then will they be able to live out his ideals of finding a historical and Biblical place to stand in the world.. A place which is based on the best of Anabaptist faith and life and is brought to bear on the present life of the community, shaping that contemporary life and providing it with a vision by which to go forward to meet all the challenges of its life as the church "in the world but not of the world."

#### NOTES

1 — Levi Miller: "The Anabaptist Vision and How It Has Changed the Mennonite Church", Gospel Herald, April 26, 1994, pg. 3.

2 — For this paper, I am using the selection from the Vision given by Al Keim, which appeared in the Gospel Herald, April 19, 1994, pages 6-7.

3 — Leo Driedger: Mennonite Identity Conflict, Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, NY, 1988, pg. 170.

4 — This discussion draws on the description of the origins of the Beachy Amish found in Elmer S. Yoder's book, The Beachy Amish Mennonite Fellowship Churches, Diakonia Ministries, Ohio, 1987. See especially pages 100-120.

5 — This is found as an editorial footnote by Bender to the article by Alvin J. Beachy, "The Rise and Development of the Beachy Amish Mennonite Churches", Mennonite Quarterly Review, 29.2, April, 1955 (pp. 118-140) and is found on page 118.

6 — When looking at the list of the congregations given in the 1994 edition of the Mennonite Yearbook, I found that the word "Fellowship" appears for 51 of the 121 congregations; "Beachy" appears for only 1 congregation, with the name "Amish Mennonite" the most often used.

7 — There recently was the call for a group of bishops to draw up a list of agreed on points of practice which would be used as a gauge of whether a church could be considered a part of the Beachy Amish Fellowship. But lacking a conference structure, there was and continues to be no one to enforce such control of identity.

8 — Orrin Klapp: Opening and Closing: Strategies of Information Adaption in Society, Cambridge University Press, NY, 1978. See especially chapter 2.

9 — Klapp-19.

10 — The figures for 1927 are based on an estimate made by Elmer Yoder in his 1987 book (see page 148), and the figures for 1994 are drawn from the 1994 Mennonite Yearbook (pg. 203).

11 — This point of contact came through in the survey response of Yost Miller in a letter to the author, 6-21-94.

12 — Steve Russell commented that his first reading of the Vision came after he had realized that his own convictions were similar to the Anabaptists and this statement summarized for him what the Anabaptists believed. Letter to the author, 7-23-94.

13 — Lester Gingerich: The Church, A Theocracy: A Study of the New Testament Church, Pilgrim Publishers, 1987. Bender is mentioned especially in Gingerich's discussion of brotherhood. See especially page 18.

14 — Ron Border: "The Principle of Nonresistance", Calvary Messenger, July, 1981, pp. 3-5.

15 — William McGrath has written many different short books and tracts related to Anabaptist and Church History. Especially useful for his use of Bender and the Anabaptist Vision is his recent book, Conservative Anabaptist Theology, Christian Printing Mission, 1994.

16 — Paul L. Miller: Letter to the author, 7-10-94.

17 — Ron Border: Letter to the author, 9-12-94.

18 — Simon Schrock: One Anothering, Harbour House Publishers, 1986, 1990. This book, written by the bishop of the present author's congregation, has gone through two editions and is very popular among many of the Beachy Amish.

19 — Freeman Miller: Letter to the author, 7-30-94.

20 — Steve Russell: Letter to the author, 7-23-94.

21 — Stephen F. Dintaman: "The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision", The Conrad Grebel Review 10.2, Spring, 1992, pp. 205-208. I heartily applaud the questions and criticisms which Dintaman, my former teacher, raises. And those who critique him for speaking out against social action are missing the whole point of his article. It was not to criticize social action, but rather to critique the notion that social action is THE GOSPEL.

22 — Daniel Nisly: Letter to the author, 8-06-94.

23 — I owe my knowledge of the concept of the "stranger" as described by Simmel to the discussion on the subject in Leo Driedger's book: The Ethnic Factor: Identity in Diversity, McGraw-Hill, Ryerson, 1989. See especially pp. 222-223.

24 — Steve Russell: Letter to the author, 7-23-94.

25 — Too often Fundamentalism is defined in a broad way which stretches it almost to the point of breaking. An example of this is when the charge of Fundamentalism is used to describe a group when

describing their commitment to peace, as opposed to the Anabaptist approaches to peace of another group. An example of this is found in Leo Driedger, "The Peace Panorama: Struggle for the Mennonite Soul", The Conrad Grebel Review 10.3, Fall, 1993 (pp. 289-308), and especially when using Fundamentalism to explain why a segment of the Mennonite family has negative feelings toward the work of "peace", "justice", and "MCC". This reluctance cannot be explained simply by raising the charge of Fundamentalism, for the description which Driedger gives here would describe many Beachy Amish who are theological conservatives but are a far way from being Fundamentalists in any real sense. The issue is not Fundamentalism versus Anabaptism, but rather the way in which a group's commitment to peace is expressed and not the commitment itself.

26 — Recently in his 1994 book, The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind, historian Mark Noll has argued that the greatest influence of fundamentalism on contemporary evangelism has been in a "mentality" or in "intellectual habits". And I would argue the same for the influence of Fundamentalism among the Beachy Amish, at least at the present time, although a growing acceptance of the content of Fundamentalist ideas is slowly becoming evident. For Noll's discussion of this see especially pp. 137-139 in The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind, Eerdman's Publishing Co., 1994.

27 — William McGrath: Conservative Anabaptist Theology, Christian Printing Mission, 1994.

28 — Noah Keim: Letter to the author, 8-12-94. This idea of the benefit of a greater use of the Anabaptist Vision for teaching purposes came through a private conversation with Leonard Overholt, a Beachy Amish bishop from Ohio.

