

*Woodlawn Beachy Amish Church at Goshen, Ind., was one the progressive congregations that expressed concern about the loss of congregational authority during the 1990s.*

Mennonite Church USA Archives-Goshen



# Congregation or conference?

## The development of Beachy Amish polity and identity

by Cory Anderson

The Beachy Amish Mennonite Church originated when a scattered group of Old Order Amish splinter congregations began to recognize one another and fellowship with each other between 1928 and the 1940s. Moses Beachy of Somerset County, Pa., from which the group derives its name, was influential in the early years, traveling to various states, organizing affiliated congregations and reinstating ordained leaders whose authority had been revoked by local Old Order Amish. While the Beachys discontinued certain Old Order Amish practices, such as prohibitions on motor vehicles and electric power from the grid and eschewing meetinghouses, they remained very congregational like the Old Orders. It was a deliberate

choice not to utilize the centralized “conference” approach of similar groups such as the Conservative Mennonite Conference and regional conservative Mennonite conferences.

Yet Beachy congregationalism has become more bureaucratized than the Old Order Amish. Whereas broader, inter-settlement formal organization among the Old Orders is limited to the Steering Committee—an organizational response to government pressure relating to the military draft—the Beachys have developed numerous committees that represent constituency-wide programs. The first formal organization among the Beachys was Amish Mennonite Aid (AMA), begun in 1955 when a group of ministers created a three-man committee to investigate a

possible coordinated relief effort in Germany. Two years later, the AMA committee’s existence was renewed indefinitely.

With the rise of AMA also came the development of foreign missions, financial assistance, publishing, education and other Beachy organizations, which required regular meetings of ministers to conduct their business. The meetings served a dual function of addressing formal organizational matters but also informally discussing constituency issues. In a 1957 meeting of ministers about relief efforts, the AMA committee developed a list of issues for consideration, concluding that “the committee believes this is all it is authorized to submit, but does understand that other bishops and ministers will probably

desire to discuss other problems with the assembled group.” In addition to casually mentioning that ministers may wish to meet for reasons beyond AMA work, the committee sent with the letter a list of 64 Beachy ministers. By creating and distributing such a list, the committee recognized which ministers, and thus their congregations, were considered to be fellow Beachy.

Such a flourishing bureaucracy was more characteristic of mainline Protestant denominations, including Mennonite, than the Old Order Amish. Yet the Beachys have resisted hierarchical centralization and successfully maintained individual congregational autonomy. The administration of a congregation remained with every local bishop or other leader, which meant that no outside person or committee could

make any compulsory decision. What resulted was a considerable variation in practice among the Beachys. Not until the 1990s did they institute an experimental committee that spoke to issues of belief and practice on behalf of the constituency.

The Beachys started annual ministers’ meetings in the 1960s, and it became the mechanism by which various committees met and reported and by which ministers could voice their perspectives to a generally representative body of the constituency. The congregation or congregations hosting the meetings each year were responsible for moderating the sessions, selecting sermon topics and assigning speakers. Thus the meetings tended to reflect the extent to which the hosts drew their lines of acculturation in both practice and thought.

The Cedar Grove congregation near Wellesley, Ont., with help from neighboring like-minded Beachy congregations, hosted the 1991 meeting. Cedar Grove had historically been on the fringes of fellowship, maintaining conservative dress and grooming while other congregations relaxed their standards. The ordained men chosen to speak at the meeting were nearly all prominently conservative leaders who echoed the sentiments of the Cedar Grove ministers, expressing concern about behaviors and beliefs of the Beachy laity. “To maintain convictions, we need to have convictions,” declared bishop Henry Hershberger from LaGrange County, Ind. Bishop Perry Troyer of Plain City, Ohio, asked, “Should we not as a constituency band together and conclude on some of these principles that we together and unitedly uphold

## Historical Committee names student essay contest winners



Sensenig

Examinations of two 20th-century frontiers of Mennonite faithfulness were the winning entries in this year’s John Horsch Mennonite History Essay Contest, sponsored by the Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee.



Showalter

“Incarnation, Not Intervention: Mennonite Service and Just Peacemaking in Somalia” by Peter Sensenig was judged the best paper in the graduate school/seminary category, while “The Mennonite Young People’s Conference Movement, 1919-1923: Beyond the Tragedy of Its Failure to the Legacy of Its Vision” by Anna Showalter took first in the college/university category.

Sensenig, a student at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif.,

explored the ethical underpinnings of Mennonite responses to the humanitarian disaster in Somalia in the 1990s. Showalter, from Goshen (Ind.) College, focused on the Mennonite Young People’s Conference, a short-lived but influential reform movement that challenged the “Old” Mennonite Church and its understandings of peace, service and discipleship.

Cory Anderson from Ohio State University in Columbus and Jeff Friesen from Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Man., tied for second place in the graduate school/seminary category. Anderson’s paper was on “The Beachy Amish Mennonite Bishop Committee and the Conflict Between Congregational Autonomy and Affiliation Criteria.” Friesen’s wrote about “On Seeing the Beauty of Christ: Exploring the Possibility of Aesthetics in Pilgrim Marpeck’s Christology.”

In the college/university category, second place went to Nathan Kauffman

of Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Va., for “In His Steps in the EMS *Journal*: EMS Student Movement to a Social Gospel of Charles M. Sheldon, 1929-1937,” while Goshen student Daniel Foxvog was third with “Working in Solidarity and Witnessing to Transformation: Christian Peacemaker Teams in Hebron, 1995-2010.”

No entry was awarded first place in the high school category. Justin Wiebe of Westgate Mennonite Collegiate in Winnipeg, Man., was second with “The Kleine Gemeinde: Reformers in the Church.”

Excerpts from Showalter’s and Anderson’s papers are excerpted in this issue of *Mennonite Historical Bulletin*.

Fourteen students submitted papers for this year’s contest. Judges were Jean Kilheffer Hess of Lancaster, Pa., Gerlof Homan of Normal, Ill., and Roger Juhnke of Newton, Kan.

these principles?” He then cited a litany of concerns in the church, such as divorce and remarriage. “Far too many people and preachers don’t really know where they stand on these issues,” Troyer said. “It is any wonder our people are confused, and the Word of God provides a remedy for confusion.”

With his sermon encouraging committee work to unify the fellowship, bishop John Mast of Crossville, Tenn., brought the meeting to its apex. When he noted that Anabaptist leaders of the past had a written testimony of where they stood, what they believed and how they strived towards unity, the Cedar Grove ministers responded and opened the floor for the assembly to cite specific problems they thought needed attention. One by one,

### 18 original issues

- Divorce and remarriage
- Excommunication and shunning
- Television
- Radio
- Video
- Sisters’ veiling (size)
- Instrumental music
- Public bathing
- Casual wear
- Rock, country, secular music
- Courtship standards
- Sports
- Lord’s Day activities
- Properly chaperoned youth (motels, materialism, etc.)
- Hair styles (brethren and sisters)
- Mutual respect for committee work
- Effective teaching program for parents
- Scriptural unity

*A statement about materialism was to be added to the final list.*

ministers called out: sports, the head covering, divorce and remarriage, casual dress, radio, television, music, unsupervised youth activities, hair styles, work, inappropriate Sunday activities and more until 18 issues were recorded (see sidebar). The moderating host committee suggested an investigation committee be created to examine the issues and propose a response. The ministers cast their ballots for committee members, and four of the five elected had been speakers at the meeting.

The committee’s first action after the ministers’ meeting was to send the 18 issues to three prominent ordained men in the constituency for written feedback about each point. Once the committee had received the responses, it sent letters to all Beachy ministers “to suggest the possibility of drawing up a statement in booklet form of our belief, faith and practice, and our position on Biblical principles and issues facing our churches.” Committee members also explicitly stated that “we do not want a conference setting nor take the executive [sic] board approach. However, the other extreme has left us hanging with some weaknesses.” The committee proposed a set of defined lines of practice that would help define membership in Beachy churches.

At the 1992 ministers’ meeting, the committee “sense[d] a strong support for the work and at the same time some still express fears of developing a conference and an Executive Board.” Nevertheless, the committee continued with its assignment and that fall sent the final draft to all ministers. Titled “A Charge to Keep, I Have” (taken from a John Wesley hymn), the document was accompanied by a short questionnaire asking if the recipients can accept, accept with

specified amendments or not accept the statement. It seemed on its way to adoption.

While all ministers seemed agreed in their opposition to a conference/executive board approach in principle, the potential reality generated concerns. Would congregations be required to change current stances to conform to the statement? Would compliance determine a congregation’s eligibility for affiliation? Would Beachy leadership, such as the Bishop Committee, be able to step in uninvited if it believes a congregation has violated the statement? The lack of consensus prompted the committee to quietly abandon implementation of the document as a whole. The minority who opposed the implementation of the document—generally those churches with more permissive practices—generated enough resistance by way of phone calls, letters and personal conversations that the committee did not feel it could move ahead as planned.

The committee decided to pursue an alternative to adopting the document, choosing instead to seek support of the 18 issues one at a time. On the recommendation of the Bishop Committee at the 1995 ministers’ meeting in Hutchinson, Kan., the committee began formulating positions on radio, TV and divorce and remarriage “to establish a biblical position for present and future reference.” Later that year, a draft was distributed with two main points: (1) television and radio are barred because of their “enslaving effects,” and (2) it is unacceptable for a divorced person to remarry. At the spring 1996 ministers’ meeting in Sarasota, Fla., the committee suggested that if the positions are adopted, congregations

not in compliance would be considered ineligible to participate in the annual ministers' meetings. With the floor open for comment, enough concerns were expressed about the divorce and remarriage proposal that the committee opted not to take a vote. The statement on television and radio was better received. A straw vote was called for, and everyone who didn't want to allow radio or TV stood. From the platform, no one could be seen sitting. While the action did not officially adopt the proposal, it still made a statement.

But it was a statement that was troubling to some. In the May 1996 issue of the *Calvary Messenger*, the Beachy Amish periodical, columnist D.L. Miller noted concerns about the loss of congregationalism. "Some brethren had reservations, not about the three issues addressed, but their cause for pause was related to procedure, structure, etc.," he wrote. Still the question remained: How can such matters be appropriately addressed? Perry Troyer wrote to the committee that he sensed "an alarm go off concerning the statement that those who choose not to support a decision made by the body, would then forfeit the privilege to host the Ministers Meetings, share a topic at the meetings or teach at Calvary Bible School [the annual Beachy Amish educational program]."

Again, the committee reached a point of reflection. In a letter to the ministers, committee members said they felt they were "receiving mixed signals as to what is expected and desired." Some people wanted the Beachy ministerial body, under the leadership of the Bishop Committee, to "curb undesirable practices," while others were "uncomfortable with this arrangement." The letter included a questionnaire whether

the committee should be terminated or how it should proceed. By the time of the 1997 ministers' meeting, about 110 of 300 questionnaires had been returned, most of them supporting the committee's continuation. But the respondents also favored rotating committee members and commented on the committee's seen seemingly "rather scattered" purpose. The committee surmised that its purpose was to provide "some kind of guidance, addressing needs and concerns facing the church. And of course continue to address the original 18 issues."

In his response, Miller went beyond the immediate questionnaire and drafted a two-page statement of "Church and Inter-Church Structure." He wrote that the statement had support from leaders of at least five congregations that were on the permissive end of practice in the constituency. "[T]his autonomous structure must be balanced with a sensitivity toward and respect for each autonomous body within the general constituency," Miller summarized. "We cannot be arrogantly independent." He made no concrete proposals but rather encouraged attention to trends with "a willingness to take necessary steps to guard ourselves," emphasis on teaching programs, perhaps even a method by which lay members could bring concerns to the larger body.

Daniel Nisly, a Kansas minister like Miller, felt the committee should discontinue its work altogether. "If we move toward the idea that [a congregation] doesn't come up to our expectations, then are they not only not one of us but anyone who preaches for them will also be cut off?" His comments exposed one of the core fears among the more permissive congregations,

that if a constituency-wide statement of practice would be adopted, they may have to choose between revising their practice or being disfellowshipped. The committee in December wrote another letter to the constituency, this time addressing the perennial concerns about conference-style approaches. Beginning by commending the ministers for their show of support of the statement against television and radio, the letter concluded, "It does not seem that congregational autonomy is violated by some inter-congregational appeals when there is significant concern about the influence of some practices. Congregational commitment to respect basic inter-congregational issues would seem appropriate for the sake of keeping up inter-congregational fellowship and ministries."

At the 1999 minister's meeting, held at Salisbury, Pa., the gathered ministers rose to their feet in an official and overwhelming show of support for the statement against radio and television. Eight years after the conception of the committee, the committee succeeded in the adoption of two of the 18 points of concern raised at the Ontario meeting. Despite this achievement, however, the remarriage statement, shelved at the 1996 ministers' meeting, remained at the bottom of the pile, as did the 15 issues that remained untouched.

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